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If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to <http://www.deep-magic.net> where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please send an email to feedback@deep-magic.net, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

March 2004

We did it! As most of you know, this last month was to decide the future of Deep Magic. And you, our readers, stepped up! Thanks to your generous pledges, we reached our goal of \$2000, which will enable us to transition into a non-profit company and continue this great adventure.

However, it's not quite over. Now it's time to collect all your pledges (and we'll need them all!). For those of you who did not make a pledge, it's not too late. You can send in a donation directly. And for those of you in the U.S., these donations will become tax-deductible, as soon as our non-profit status is secure.

For information on getting your pledge money (or new donation) to us, [go here](#). We ask that those who sent in pledges please honor them by the end of March.

We also wanted to thank all those who sent in words of support. It really lifted our spirits. We have put a sample of some of what our readers had to say on the next page.

A new, exciting era of Deep Magic is about to begin. We will be making some exciting announcements in the near future. As our first announcement, our next novel will be available within days at Amazon.com. We started serializing the first book of Procyx in our first issue of Deep Magic. We now bring you all three books in one 700-page tome! [Go here for ordering information](#).

Not to be overshadowed by all the recent excitement, the next issue of Deep Magic awaits. We offer you four new short stories. We also have an interview with Betsy Mitchell, Editor-In-Chief of Del Rey Books, and a short article by Brendon Taylor that puts a little definition on the stories you write. And for those who have waited for the return of our recent serialized novel, Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay, we bring back the first installment under the true author's name, with a few changes from the first time around. We once again would like to thank the author, Keri Stevenson, for her understanding and willingness to let us publish her novel.

A quick message from The Geek: He apologizes for not having a Geek's Guide to Grammar this month. Suggestions for topics are always welcome on the message boards.

And one final note from the editors: We're going to be around for quite a while now, so let's get those submissions rolling in!

Thank you all for your support. Enjoy the March issue of Deep Magic!

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

We wish we could print them all. The letters of support and pledges we received are all greatly appreciated. Here are just a few ranging all over the globe (from Brazil to Bangalore):

Hey there Deep Magic folks,

I just read the note on your website telling about the possible shutdown of your great site. I'm sending this email for some moral support as I'm not above eighteen and I could not help you even if I were, I'm from Brazil, you see, and here US\$1.00 is equal to R\$3.50, so, any help I would give would be very expensive for me and not to good for you either...

I'm the kind of guy that always plans to write emails to people who deserve but never did actually write them. Well, first thing I'm doing after reading the note is sending this email to you. I know this kind of support will not allow the website to go on with the marvelous job, but it has to count for something, doesn't it?

Well, sorry to be wasting your time, and you'll be probably receiving lots of emails like this one. You do not need to feel obligated to answering it in any way. Just wanted you to know that somewhere in São Paulo, Brazil, there's a sixteen year old guy that wishes Deep Magic the best of luck to resolve the problem that has just appeared.

Alex

PS: If sadly Deep Magic has to close the site, just remember how much hours of reading pleasure you gave worldwide. If there IS a safe place for minds to wander, Deep Magic has found it. You did a great job

Hi, I have really enjoyed reading your magazine for some time now. I pledge to contribute \$10 to Deep Magic. I am from Bangalore, India.

Regards, Mani.

I pledge \$25 to Deep Magic. I would gladly pay that much as a yearly subscription, if that's what it took to keep the magazine going. That's nearly what I pay for my Asimov's subscription and I enjoy reading you guys just as much.

Mike

I've been reading it for only three months now, but it is probably the finest quality e-zine I've come accross. I'd hate to see it go under when there are so few outlets to read & submit good fantasy & sf fiction.

I'd love to be able to pledge more, but it's going to be a tight year, and my other magazine subscriptions have all had to come to an end, so this effectively will be my only subscription for the year. I can't think of a better mag to subscribe to.

Keep up the good work.

Colin

Dear Deep Magic:

I have really enjoyed your magazine, specially the articles. I think the new book reviews are very helpful, and I love the artwork. Thanks for supporting good, clean fantasy/SF, as well as nurturing new writers. Keep up the good work!

Jessica

By golly! After reading the posts on the message board, I was inspired to make a pledge of ... \$25. I've been meaning to get around to sending in a pledge, but have been putting it off. No more!

I am not a member or subscriber to Deep Magic, at least not in the sense that you fine folks at Deep Magic have my name on a list anywhere. (Not until now, that is!) However, I do download the issues of Deep Magic and enjoy them immensely. I'm ashamed to say that the first thing I did when I saw the request for pledges was not to send in a pledge, but to download all issues of Deep Magic out there. A mistake I hope I have corrected.

I love fantasy stories, and to a slightly lesser extent, SF stories. Every now and then, I go online and do a Google search for fantasy ezines. Fantasy, however, mostly turns up links to fantasy sports and links to entries of a more ... um ... raunchy nature. Hence, whenever I find a fantasy ezine, I bookmark it right away.

Deep Magic is a treasure. It truly is a place of magic and enchantment. The quality is extraordinarily high. The cover artwork is always breathtaking and the stories are excellent. Okay, normally in a SF/fantasy ezine I rarely read the articles. I'm there for the flights of imagination, not for the more down-to-earth entries. However, the articles on Deep Magic are a wonderful blend of humour and information. Even if I were not actually absorbing the information put forth in the articles, the humour in them make them interesting reads.

I've seen the demise of other good fantasy ezines. It's always a terrible loss and heart-wrenching to see them disappear. I hope Deep Magic does not end that way. I've downloaded the 22 issues you've published so far in the off-chance that the magazine might not be around. I hope that does not happen. I've just read the first issue and am on my second, so I've a long way to go before I run out of issues. Here's wishing you well and hoping Deep Magic has an extremely long run.

George

I'd just like to say how much I appreciate Deep Magic, for its stories and articles. The monthly grammar articles are really useful to me as a home-school student. I hope you guys can keep going!

Dustin

It is a wonderful e-zine and has been a valuable resource. I feel that a yearly subscription to a quality monthly print magazine would be worth it. I hope that you will find enough dedicated readers to ante up and support your wonderful magazine (but it would sure be nice to have a print version).

Christine
wannabe fantasy author, but mostly a fantasy reader

I have enjoyed Deep Magic for some time now. I continue to marvel at the energy and talent you invest every month. I will be happy to pledge each year if you can keep this wonder alive.

Sincerely,
Bob

I will donate 15USD. I live in Istanbul, Turkey and salaries are not high in my country. Thanks for the great effort you have shown till now.

Mustafa

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.*** We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the 15th to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

March 2004 Writing Challenge

We recently asked our readers to come up with some writing challenge suggestions and put them on the Message Board (brilliant, aren't we?). This challenge comes from reader and contributor Steve Poling. We figured it would be appropriate to announce in March leading up to April 1st (April Fool's day in the USA). The challenge is this: create the most deceptive opening you can. Lead the reader to expect one thing in the beginning of the story, and then in the last paragraph cast everything into a completely different light. Make it so that everything you read up to that point meant something completely different. Surprise and trick our readers. But keep it to 1000 words.

Selections from the February 2004 Writing Challenge

The Death of
Penfield Dragicevich
Kingsgate
Redemption Is Futile
Betrayal
Childish Betrayal

CORRECTION: Last month, we ran a writing challenge submission under the wrong author name. The Resolution of Faulk the Free was actually written and submitted by Gregory Adams. Our apologies to Gregory for the mistake. (The issue now reflects this correction.)

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

As we learned in Cecelia Dart-Thornton's article in January's issue, words can be powerful. But can a single word be powerful enough to create a story? We're about to find out in this month's writing challenge. We will provide a few words, and your job will be to take one of these abstract words and make it concrete by giving it a story. If more than one of these words inspire you, feel free to incorporate them into the story. The words to choose from are: Injustice, Ambition, Betrayal, Redemption, Humility.

Bring one or more of these words to life in a story, and keep it to 1000 words.

The Death of Penfield Dragicevich

By Steve Poling

Pen didn't respond when Malcom entered his office out of breath, his face red. Silently he watched the workmen constructing Avalon, the first city on this planet, his workmen, his city, his planet.

Malcolm Lewis sat down. He didn't wait to be acknowledged, but started speaking, the words spilling out of his mouth in a torrent. "Pen, I don't believe this. You can't be serious. It's inhuman."

Penfield Dragicevich, the Pendragon, turned away from the window and smiled benignly--as if his expression alone might resolve the confrontation he foresaw in his friend's redness of face and hoarseness of voice.

"Calm yourself Malcolm. It's the best way. You have to transcend limitations of your perspective. You aren't seeing how this will allow us to overcome death. How it will assure that everything we have worked to accomplish can be sustained. Malcolm, we've accomplished too much to put it in jeopardy. Look at history--at the content of our truth. Every religion begins with one great man who reveals it and subsequent generations pervert his message after he dies. You know Jesus taught the truth that we rediscovered, and how Paul and Augustine perverted it."

"Pen, that's what not the problem. It's this latest idea of yours; it's too horrible. We're condemning generations of our unborn children to, to..."

"To our truth. If we don't do this, our truth will be lost. It will be replaced with the false truth of someone in the next generation or the one after that. Our truth will be restructured and deconstructed until it has become as perverted as what Christianity has become. The Camelot Movement will just become another corrupt spin-off."

"The cost is too high."

"Some prices just have to be paid."

"Pen. This is terrible. Don't you see it?"

"It is the will of God."

Malcolm Lewis knew the code words. He'd heard them often enough. They had built the Camelot Movement, a cult fashionable among the successful and influential. Each man knew the other as well as he knew himself. When Pen said, "It is the will of God," Malcolm understood it to mean, "It's what Pen wants."

Malcolm leapt to his feet, shouting and leaning over Pen's desk. "I won't let you. I'll stop you. I'll go public. I'll appeal to the Terrans. I'll tell the colonists. They'll never stand for it. They'll refuse to submit to the procedure."

Malcolm didn't see the gun. Pen gave no indication that he'd pulled it from the holster built into his desk. He looked his best friend in his eye as he pulled the trigger. Some prices just had to be paid.

Kingsgate

By J.T. Slane

And to make the evening even worse, it started to snow. A light dusting, just thick enough to tease their eyelashes. To make the six guardsmen pull their cloaks tighter and bemoan the evening.

"Just what we need. What next? A little sleet to worsen the chill?" Braggon wiped his nose on his sleeve and shivered. The day's growth on his cheeks cast little spiky shadows in the firelight.

"It could be worse. We could be walking the battlement walls with nary but a torch. The wind is knife-cold up there. Sharp enough to cut through you. At least we're in the crook of the wall."

"You can have your hardly any wind. Wish I had two more blankets. My toes are like rocks."

Pike sniggered and then spat on the cobblestones. "But they smell like horse withers. And don't we all know that."

"You can cut your tongue and feed it to a street cur, Pike. I'll not be listening to your insults this night, by the Rood. Can't you feel it in the air? At least those shivering fools on the wall can see the Black March's army. I heard in the Wench's Whistle that it's encamped six leagues from these very walls."

"I heard two leagues," said Nim, the shortest of the guardsmen. "How his army came this close without challenge from King Von, I'd like to know." He chafed his arms, rattling the hauberk beneath his square-pegged wool sleeves. "Six thousand men at arms. By the Rood."

"Eight thousand it was. But what would be twenty thousand against the City? No one has ever breached us. The walls are sure. We have enough in the garrison to hold them until King Von can return from the Wisternessee. It was a sly move of the Black March, but he'll lose twenty men for every one of ours."

"And they'll all freeze to death with winter coming early," Braggon said.

"No, lad. The freeze will help them. The mud will freeze, don't forget. Make it easier for the men to walk."

"Aye, and they'll be healthier before we kill them. Hale or harrowed, an arrow will still kill a man crossing a field, whether he runs or crawls."

"You should have been a poet, Braggon. That was almost inspired."

Braggon scowled, wiping his nose again. "I wish we were at the front walls, instead of lurking here at Kingsgate. I'd like a long bow in the morn. To kill a score of Black Marchers myself. Maybe bring down the Ragged Staff himself, his lordship of the March. King Von would give me an earldom, wouldn't he?"

"You? You can't even pizzle in a ditch without missing!" Pike said with a bark of a laugh.

"I said I wanted none of your tongue tonight! I'll cuff you then you'll be sorry!"

"Cuff me and you'll get a knife in your belly. An earldom, what a jest. And what would you do with an earldom. We're but simple soldiers, have none of a lords ways or manners. You may as well make a crown of these snowflakes for as long as your earldom would last."

"I'm not going to take it," Braggon growled. "I'm not going to take it no more. You revile me for sport. I won't take it."

“Don’t get up, Braggon,” Nim said. “He’s a fool’s tongue. I think King Von would truly reward you if you brought down the flag of the Ragged Staff. He’s a rebel and a traitor and deserves to hang from the highest oak. And I know I’d not be the only one throwing acorns at his corpse.”

Melch sat forward. “Is that a bottle of wine, Toric?”

“What if it is?”

“A bottle of wine?”

“Who’s got a bottle?”

“Little Aimee give you that before you came to duty?”

“I’m only going to take a little sip. The captain won’t mind.”

“By the Rood, but you’ll share it!” Pike said, reaching for it. Toric squirmed it away from him.

“You’ll all drink it down before I get my share of swallows. I’ll share when I’m good at ready.”

“You always were the greedy one,” Braggon said, shuffling to his feet. “Give it here, Toric.”

“No! It’s mine!”

“Shush, you fools! You want the captain to waken?”

“Give it here, Toric!”

“I’ll share it, but only a sip. Swear it.”

“Oh don’t be such a *fargonner*. Give it here.”

Toric grimaced as he twisted the cork free and opened the lip. The greedy soldiers huddled nearby, one watching the captain’s quarters set into the gatehouse. The bottle passed quickly, little sips to take off the night’s chill. Then Nim added some scrap to the fire to brighten it.

“It’s getting colder,” he muttered.

“Aye. You can feel it. It’s past midnight.”

Pike shook his head. “Colder than death itself. Add some more wood.”

“No, it’s bright enough already. Sit closer.”

“Add another stick, Nim! It’s cold!”

Toric watched them, one by one, as they fought off the sleep. The struggle did not last long, and the snowflakes began burying them. When each man lay dead, he rose from his place near the wall. He put the empty wine bottle in his sack and slung it over his shoulder. Quietly, he stole into the captain’s quarters. A pinch of the powder had killed him hours earlier. Sweating, he took the key from around captain Blodstone’s neck and went to the gate called Kingsgate. He fit the key inside the rusty lock and twisted. The gears groaned and grated. Shivering from the snowfall, he shoved against the crossbar and opened it. He stared at the black iron handle for a moment, seeing a sack of glittering gold coins in his mind. He pulled open the door.

They wore tunics of black stained with snow as they entered the city from Kingsgate. One of the men patted Toric on the back, giving him a wink. A shush and murmur and then the young Ragged Staff himself entered, wearing a thick cloak fringed with a glossy pelt. Toric dropped to one knee, crunching into the snow and ice.

“Where’s the man?”

“Kneeling before you, my lord. He’s the one. Neric, he’s called.”

A shiver went down the betrayer’s spine. An earldom maybe? What was the City worth to the man who craved to be its king? Shivering with cold and anticipation, Neric risked a glance up.

Contempt burned in the blue eyes regarding him.

“Hang him.”

Redemption Is Futile

By Folker Debusscher

“Why?”

“Because there is always a difference between words on paper and spoken words, mister Tollins.”

Tollins rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. He had thought that this farce of justice would not last long, but the Interstellar Court (imagination had been low in supply, Tollins had once commented) had insisted on doing things the proper way.

“That’s not what I meant. Why this hearing? I pleaded guilty, did I not?”

“Perhaps, but even we are bound by certain rules, mister Tollins.” The judge threw him a sharp look. “Now, your account of the facts, if you please.”

“As long as it speeds things up.”

The accused took large draught of water and positioned himself more comfortably in his chair, to great irritation of almost all those present.

“Well, where to begin?”

“The moment you were given command of the Nemesis cruiser. We know the rest.”

“No, you do not. Perhaps it is better if I begin at the beginning, so as not to be condemned for the wrong reasons.”

He sipped once more from his glass of water, and the judge eyed him angrily.

“Mister Tollins!”

“I was born and raised on a backwater mining station near the Kuiperbelt, cut off from the rest of civilisation. My mother died giving birth to my younger brother, who in turn died a few months later.”

“That’s quite odd, in this day and age.”

“The only traces of civilization we had, sir, were mining equipment and a distillery. My father had a strange way of looking at technology, but then, he also had a strange idea of pedagogy; he hit me as punishment, he hit me as entertainment, he hit me when he was drunk, or simply when he felt like it.”

“Please, mister Tollins. Are you trying to invoke feelings of sympathy?”

“Oh, no, far from it. I am simply saying that I was more than happy to leave ‘home’ – if that is what I could call it – and enlist. By joining the military, I accomplished two things: I finally found a form of family, and I easily managed to make my father pay for his crimes.”

“What are you saying?”

“I was twenty-four when I returned to the station, together with a few friends. We hit him and kicked him until he died. He probably was too drunk to feel much pain anyway. Afterwards, I felt like I did him a favour, instead of punishing him.”

There was total silence in the court. Finally, after a few moments, the judge found his voice.

“Why are you telling us this?”

“Everyone who was there is already dead, and I would hate being locked away with untold secrets in my mind. Besides, it doesn’t really matter whether I am imprisoned for eternity, or imprisoned for eternity plus an extra thirty years for murder one.”

The judge looked at him coldly and nodded. "Please continue, mister Tollins."

"I rose quickly through the ranks, outranking those I went to the Academy with in no time. I even made the holonet once. I've still got the broadcast. 'Youngest captain in the history of the Stellar Navy'." He chuckled. "God, how proud I was. Everyday I poured my heart into whatever I did. I frequently joined the soldiers in fighting the ever present pirate threat. The men admired me and I felt like Caesar must have felt. Hell, I even found love, inside seven-hundred metric tons of steel in the middle of nowhere, of all places. She died a few months later in a pirate attack and I mourned her, but I could not dwell on it. Instead, all efforts to eliminate the outlaws were redoubled. When the brass saw how I dealt with the loss, they decided to promote me."

Tollins stopped and stared at his hands.

"Mister Tollins?"

He suddenly looked up, straight at the judge. "Do you know where the Nemesis was stationed, sir?"

"Yes, it was the flagship of the armada into the New Worlds."

"Indeed it was. Flagship of the dirtiest war in a very long time."

"Are you going to justify your actions by convicting the war?" the judge asked with certain disbelief.

"I cannot justify my actions, sir. What I have done was inhumane, but it was necessary. The war, however, was the first, but definitely not the second." He raised his hand. "Shht, be quiet and allow me to explain. The First Galactic War erupted over a border conflict. Horrible, yes; unneeded, absolutely; understandable, against all odds, yes. The New World War, on the other hand, had quite another reason."

"An unprovoked attack on a passenger ship, if I am not mistaken?"

"You are mistaken."

Tollins turned to one of the orb-cameras that hovered about the room.

"The Sapphire Rose was not destroyed by the Thanal race. The ship was blown up by the Stellar Navy, on direct command from the office of the High Admiral who was, in turn, acting on behalf of Boralon Corporation."

The judge looked at him with a raised eyebrow and an expression of disbelief on his face.

"And why in the blazes would they want that?"

"Next to the jobs it would create? One of the oldest reasons of all, sir: gold. The holy city of Natrona is built on a gigantic, natural deposit of gold ore."

"And why would we believe this... conspiracy theory?"

"You don't have to, sir. I have already accomplished what I'd hoped. The war has been ended. Because of the explosion I have caused, in spite of what the media has been spitting out."

"The Thanal surrendered, as I recall."

"What other choice did they have, sir? Only the foolish choose honour above survival. Contact them if you want a decisive answer. Now can we end this farce?"

"If what you say is true, mister Tollins, this trial is put in a whole new light."

"No, it doesn't. I have killed nearly five thousand with a single press of a button. I'll say it again: no matter what I do or what reasons I might have had, I cannot justify my actions. I am past redemption."

Betrayal

By João Silva

Fendrec's steps made almost no noise while he walked the unlit corridor. His hands scanned the rough stone walls of the temple of Galsharre, the Poisonous, feeling for signs of a cleverly disguised secret door he had discovered some time ago. His fingers felt the difference in temperature, the old wall suddenly becoming warmer.

"A kiss from a forked tongue," he chanted in a whisper, pressing his palms against the wall. The stone slowly stopped resisting him until it vanished completely, leaving an opening to a small cubicle with little in the way of furniture, possibly an old hiding place to be used in an emergency. There was light coming from a small lantern placed on a stone bench, lending some of its warmth to the room. A hooded figure sat in a corner, completely still, like a living statue. As the air turned once again to stone behind Fendrec, he saw the hood fall back to reveal Vessir's face.

"I'm glad you accepted my invitation," Fendrec said, sitting on the stone bench. The lantern now stood between them like a wall of caution and distrust, making them look somehow less human.

"I believe that you wish to speak of the ritual of poison?"

Fendrec nodded in agreement.

"As I'm sure you know, Kolup will soon be going through the ritual, to become a priest of Galsharre."

"I am aware of it, yes."

"Do you think it is fair that of the three of us, only he is given that honour? This block of stone where I'm sitting has more intelligence than him." He seemed to spit the words, as though the name of his rival had a foul taste.

"I share your opinion, though I feel the stone bench might be offended by your comparison." Vessir said, mixing humour and insult, like he always did. "Unfortunately for us, there's not much we can do. The Priests chose him."

The bitter twist in the words was not lost on Fendrec.

"Oh, but there is." Vessir's eyes seemed to brighten, and he continued. "In my researches in the temple's library, I've recently uncovered a document that spoke of another way to rise in the hierarchy, the Treacherous Way. If we betray Kolup and kill him during the ritual, we shall be ordered priests in his place. The Poisonous thrives on betrayal."

Fendrec studied the look on the other man's face, trying to divine his thoughts.

"But the Priest of Lies favours him." Vessir said after a moment of apparent reflection.

"The Priest of Lies is a title one does not earn in vain. The fact he seems to favour Kolup is all the more evidence he does not."

Vessir's lips curled in a slight smile of understanding. "What do you propose?"

All members of the Cult of Galsharre were present in the temple's great hall for the ritual of poison. Fendrec watched while Kolup put down his cup and continued the chants. As disciples of Galsharre, they all ingested small amounts of poison on a regular basis, granting them a considerable resistance to those substances. However, if Vessir had managed to switch the poison flasks like he was told, Kolup had just drunk the most potent poison to be found in the temple.

It should all end quickly. His eyes carved holes on the idiot's back, and he gripped the dagger concealed inside his sleeve with anxious fingers. Kolup kept chanting the mystic words, but suddenly his voice began slurring and he seemed to choke.

"What is the matter, Initiate Kolup?" the Priest of Lies asked in a bland tone. He shot Fendrec and Vessir a casual glance, while Kolup visibly struggled to maintain his posture and failed.

"We claim the right to invoke the Treacherous Way." Fendrec said, sounding almost too eager. "By our betrayal shall we be rewarded. By the blood spilt shall we be blessed."

The Priest of Lies listened but said nothing, and for a moment Fendrec thought he might have made a fatal mistake. A moment later, the priest took one last look at Kolup, who had by now slumped to his knees, and nodded.

"Hold him, Vessir, the time has come to finish this." Fendrec revealed his dagger and put the sharp blade to Kolup's jerking throat.

"Indeed."

The blood was abundant, but it didn't flow from Kolup's body. Fendrec's heart was pierced by Vessir's dagger.

"The Poisonous thrives on betrayal," he heard Vessir say as he fell to the ground. The pain was too great to bear and he knew he would not last long. He saw Kolup rise, smiling, laughing at him. He had been faking the whole time. Fendrec felt he deserved to die for trusting another disciple of Galsharre. How Vessir must have laughed when he planned to double-cross him! In his last moments he smiled too, noticing Kolup, who now stood behind Vessir, also carried a dagger. The Priest of Lies did well in favouring him.

Childish Betrayal

By Amy R. Butler

The hall was blazing with firelight and laughter, smells of roasting meat and the sound of clinking mugs filling the air. It was a celebration feast, banners strung from the wooden ceiling beams, tables groaning under the weight of the feast. They were dining in the small banquet hall, creating a feeling of family and bursting joy.

The kings sat at the head of the table roaring with laughter and wine, dressed in blue silks and ruddy in the face. The queen was sitting to his right, and she smiled broadly at all and drank liberally from her own goblet. To the king's left sat the little prince. His legs swung from his chair as he mimicked his parents with his greatly diluted wine. There sat the royal family, at the moment a portrait of reigning happiness.

Next to the little prince, a small girl with carefully braided dark hair and dressed in crisp green silks kept her ankles crossed and her hands folded in her lap, uncommonly quiet. Only when the little prince turned to her to tell her jokes and laugh out loud and snap his fingers so that sparks flew from the tips did the little girl come alive with wild animation. But as soon as her host turned around again, she wilted like a flower back into silence. Courses passed in front of her, and her plate remained laden with the foods that had been first presented. When an

array of sweet treats and pastries was spread upon the table, the girl slipped off her chair and wandered away into the mass of partiers. She ducked behind a knight wooing a lady fair and ran past the baby sapphire dragons until she reached the wall of the room where the light of the fire and torches did not quite reach. She followed the wall to the corner, where a pair of men sulked, their clothes drab and their faces long.

"Ah, Amon, the little lady has decided to grace us with her presence," one of the men said, his grave face twisting into a crooked smile.

"Does she consent to our plan?" Amon asked, not smiling at all.

The child ignored Amon, addressing the one who had smiled with no happiness. "Nargal, I have thought about your offer much since the last moon."

"And?" Nargal prodded.

The girl hesitated. Nargal and Amon exchanged glances.

"Mellit, we have your best interests at heart here," Nargal said. "We know how you and the young prince cherish each other, but we also know that our lord the king is not prepared for his son to marry a girl of our kingdom."

"The king sees my love for the prince," Mellit said, her forehead creasing.

"Now he takes it for childish attachment," Amon said, his voice smooth like wine. "When you reach an age of wooing, he will not look upon it with such fondness."

Mellit glanced over her shoulder back to the royal family. Her prince was laughing with his father, the queen looking on in amusement. "My lord the king has never been anything but noble and sweet to me."

"If the king wishes it, your prince will never marry you," Nargal said. He looked at her in sympathy. "Princes are not like other men, my lady. They will love who they will but will marry them only if permitted by those they consider their teacher. They see themselves smaller than they truly are, subjected when they are not."

Mellit's eyes filled with tears. "I cannot let my prince go."

"You needn't," Amon said, bending his head down to her. "Rely on us, and we will become the prince's teachers. He will listen to us, and we will encourage his love for you."

"He will listen to you?"

"We have forever held the king's ear as trusted advisors and magicians."

"But my lord the king—"

"Will never allow the only love that will ever make you happy." Nargal looked at her with kind eyes. "My child, we are watching out for you. You cannot see this far ahead, but we have already suffered these losses and learned from them. Trust us."

Mellit stared from Nargal's eyes to Amon's, and all she saw was pity and encouragement. Rubbing at her eyes, she nodded, and Nargal rose to his feet, pressing something into her hand as he did so.

"Good child. You will not regret this."

"Make sure you are not caught."

"Or you will have lost your prince for good."

"This is best for all."

"Trust us."

Mellit turned and left the two men, her hand pulled into a tight fist around the tiny pouch Nargal had given her. She slipped back to her seat, put her clenched fist in between her legs and surveyed the depleted sweets tray before her. Selecting a pastry, she munched on it half-heartedly, feeling the heat of the room become oppressive. Her pastry finished, she started on

another one and continued to fill the empty hole that was her stomach and supply the energy for her sparking nerves.

At last the music faded, the light was barely more than a glow, and the nobles were quieting with sleep and the affects of wine. Mellit stumbled from her chair and walked around the back of her dozing prince to stand next to the king. The king looked at her with bleary eyes, and then he turned his head to mumble something to his wife. Mellit knew wine well enough to realize that he would remember nothing – even if Nargal’s gift failed. Quickly unclenching her fist, Mellit took Nargal’s pouch and, standing on her tip-toes, poured the powdery contents into the king’s goblet. She scampered away before he could turn his face back to her.

Mellit engaged in two royal ceremonies in her life, a king’s funeral and a king’s wedding, and she allowed herself no remorse.

What Did I Just Write?

By Brendon Taylor

In the summer of 2002, a story began developing in my mind. Perhaps you know the feeling. I was reading a book on Norse Mythology when an idea sparked to life. I know, we get lots of those ideas for stories, most of them lasting only briefly before we dismiss them and focus on what we had been doing before the idea interrupted us. But this one was different. It came back to me when I climbed in bed that night. The next morning it was taking shape into a full-blown plot-line and even evolved to include a couple interesting characters. I started writing it.

Let me tell you something about me. I'm a youngest child with a six year gap between myself and my next-oldest sibling. I need lots of encouragement and affirmation about my writing. So, I told one of my best friends, Jeff, about the idea. He's used to this. Sometimes I think I'll surprise him by writing a complete story before I tell him or anyone else about it. That rarely happens. When I told him I was writing *Mortal Amusement*, he asked me two questions. How long is it going to be? And, when will it be ready for Deep Magic?

He knows me.

About 7,000 - 10,000 words, I thought, and within a week or two.

A couple weeks later, when I had still not posted it on the writing workshop, Jeff asked about the story again. Same questions.

About 15,000 words and another week or two.

Well, a month or so later I finished it. Over 26,000 words – it takes up over seventy pages in our anthology.

Jeff laughed at me. He's convinced I'm a novelist even though I've only finished the rough draft of one novel. He may be right. I started writing a story last fall, thinking it would be about 10,000 words. It weighs in at 12,000 words now and is not even halfway finished. But, I digress...

When I finished *Mortal Amusement*, I wondered what I had written. Maybe you've wondered the same thing yourself when you finally finished a story. I'm not talking about the quality of the piece, but the category into which the story fits.

Fortunately, I knew the story was destined for Deep Magic when I was writing it. We are one of the few fantasy/sci-fi monthly publications that publishes fiction of any length. Most e-zines and print magazines or journals prefer short fiction in the range of 10,000 words or less – some even 5,000 or less.

But, what had I written? Was it a short story? A Novella? A Short Novel? A Novelette? A piece of junk?

I did a little on-line researching and found varying definitions for the different fiction length categories. Some said short stories were anything under 10,000 words. Others said novelettes were longer than novellas. In the end, I looked to two prominent organizations and awards to settle the issue.

Here are the guidelines that the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America has

When I finished *Mortal Amusement*, I wondered what I had written. Maybe you've wondered the same thing yourself when you finally finished a story.

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established for the [Nebula Awards®](#):

Short Story: less than 7,500 words.

Novelette: at least 7,500 words but less than 17,500 words.

Novella: at least 17,500 words but less than 40,000 words.

Novel: 40,000 words or more.

The categories and word count levels for the [Hugo Awards®](#) mirror those for the Nebulas.

So, *Mortal Amusement* was a Novella. As you may discover, the shorter your fiction is, the more places you will find to market it. However, if you are prone to verbosity, and your short story merits more than 7,500 words, at least now you know what you've written. And remember, we at Deep Magic look to the quality of the tale, not the length, as our determining factor in what gets published.

Darkness In the Light

By Scott Clements

Called by some the wisest man in the world, Vainamoinen Kaleva was at least wise enough to know he was a coward, had made a coward's mistake.

And Aino – *Aino!* – died.

The burden of the wizard's shame was like the weight of the night sky and all the stars. But he had never been one to suffer mistakes and perhaps, perhaps, if the fates smiled on him and the gods were kind, he would no longer have to suffer this one.

Too late, Vainamoinen had seen. Had known he would be. She would not have howled so, had he lived. An arrow in the neck, crimson fletched, like the red-black blood that had soaked the loamy forest floor.

She had turned to him then, the largest wolf he had ever seen, regarded him with thunderhead eyes.

'I came,' Vainamoinen said, 'with the cry.'

The enormous wolf tilted her head, storm-cloud gaze falling. Staring at the body of her lifeless mate, she said softly, 'If only I were human, then might I visit the witch's pool.'

'The witch's pool?' he said.

'Yes. Baba Jaga's pool.'

'Why, mighty wolf, would you visit Bony Legs' pool? Please, tell me.'

'I would visit her pool to retrieve its water.'

'And why, mighty wolf, would you seek its water? What power does this water have?'

The great wolf paused, judged, spoke at last quietly. 'Know you not, great wizard? The witch's water can raise the dead.'

He was silent then, as wind and salvation whispered through the trees.

'Might I sing for him?' he asked into the silence, his perfect voice feather-soft. 'A final song -- for sorrow, for grief? Might I sing for him, mighty wolf?'

'I think I should like that, great wizard.'

The burden of the wizard's shame was like the weight of the night sky and all the stars.

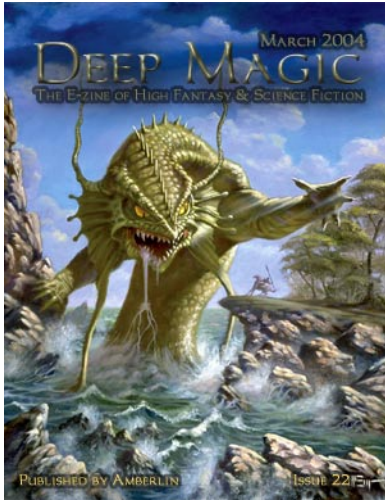
The memory was a mantra that even the frigid, predatory wind could not flay. Before him, the wizard's harsh, white breath streamed into the night, while at his sides skeletal trees swayed, their shadows grasping silently, reaching for him. Had it truly been just days before that he had spoken to the wolf, learned of the water? With each step that brought him closer to it, closer to the witch, the weather worsened while the shadows darkened. High above, the argent moon looked down on him. Kuu she was called, Mother Night and Protector of the Stars.

Beneath Kuu's hoary, uncaring gaze, Vainamoinen the Wise, the Steadfast, son of a Goddess whose might and majesty had always and ever been the source of his power, sat atop his warhorse, aged eyes narrowed. With the resigned silence of a man who knew his destiny and feared it, Vainamoinen peered through the wind-driven snow and spindly branches, strained to

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Featured Artist

Patrick McEvoy



Residence: California

Hobbies: Guitar and recording, comics, collecting art instruction books

Favorite Book or Author: I suppose my favorite book must be Breakfast of Champions by Vonnegut, simply because I've read it perhaps ten times. My favorite author changes from year to year, but the short list would include Moorcock, Gaiman, Stephenson, Niven, King, and for non-fiction, Martin Gardner.

Started Painting In: 1980

Artist Most Inspired By: N.C. Wyeth

Media You Work In: Everything at one time or another, except Watercolor, which has been exceedingly and uncharitably cruel to me. I mostly concentrate on Digital and Oil, though.

Educational/Training Background: I was an art major for two years in college. I quit that to become a music major, then dropped all that a year after college to become a programmer. And now I'm an artist again. Go figure.

Schools Attended: Hayward State University, Chabot college, and California College of Arts and Crafts, all in California

Other Training: Lots of on-the-job training as a multimedia artist and animator.

Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Collectable Card Games, including the upcoming Ice and Fire edition of A Game of Thrones from Fantasy Flight; Game books, including the new Stealth & Style from Kenzer and Co., many web site designs and multimedia games. You can always see what's newest with me at my Epilogue site (megaflow.epilogue.net) or read the blog on my home site (www.megaflowgraphics.com).

Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: Contact@megaflowgraphics.com

Website URL:
www.megaflowgraphics.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?

A: I always knew that I loved drawing, or at least making stuff up. I think comic books were my first passionate love in life, and the idea of creating something dynamic and mythic was instilled in



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me at that time. I guess it was only a matter of time before I let that part of my personality take over completely!

Q: How would you describe your work?

A: I am, more than anything, a storyteller. I don't do art to explore my own psyche, or to stretch the boundaries of any particular medium... I just enjoy entertaining and inspiring with my art. Not that I don't do personal work, or experiment with different techniques, but those are the spice to keep the work interesting, rather than the impetus.

I also enjoy rendering the human form, expressions, body language - people! Even my creatures are just people with different shapes. That's what turns me on the most. I can do a landscape, but I'm always itching to put in someone walking through it. That's what draws me to most pictures and what I feel makes my work somehow mine: the human element.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?

A: Charles Schulz said many profound things, and here's one for the ages: "writer's block is for amateurs". That goes double for artists. A professional artist can find inspiration in anything, from a sunset to a block of wood. I think that if I can't come up with an idea, or five, for any given piece of paper, I might as well give up entirely.

I do have a few tricks for getting the inspiration going, of course. For one thing, if a composition is seeming boring or static, I'll try drawing my idea with my left hand (I'm right handed). That helps every time. Also, if I'm stuck for a character design, I'll sometimes open a book on animals and start drawing the character as an animal, and that gets my ideas going for different forms and proportions.

But basically, inspiration is anywhere you happen to be. You simply have to tell yourself a story, surprise yourself somehow with unusual juxtapositions; if you can do that, then you're more than half way there.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)

A: This piece started out as nothing more than the desire to paint a scene with a rocky shoreline. And therein lies an example of telling myself a story to find inspiration...

We're on a rocky cove on a beautiful summer day, watching the water splash and spray. What if, just then, a creature emerges out of the waves, taller than the rocks, taller than the trees, blocking out the sun!

And, what if we (the witness to this scene), we are not just anyone, but a brave knight on a horse. But this is more than a mere dragon we face, it's the very soul of the sea - mighty and dangerous;

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ready to consume all those who would defy it's might!

Of course, the title of the piece is "Another Windmill"... I wanted to imply that this vision was, just perhaps, not real; that maybe the knight on a horse was just a guy with an overactive imagination. Or maybe not. As the saying goes, "they MIGHT be giants". You never know.

Q: What do you consider your influences?

A: I'm influenced almost daily by new artists and techniques. One trap I fell into when I was younger, but try not to do now, was to be influenced by specific stylistic mannerisms of artists. That leads to jumbled, unsatisfying, and often derivative art. I still love to let artists influence me, but I try to let the spirit of their art influence me, or a specific new technique, not their style.

But of course, growing up, I had a number of influences. Comics books in general, with Jack Kirby's work from the '60s and early '70s being the most important. Old comics hadn't gotten as expensive as they are now, so I was able to get a pretty good collection of those classics to breathe into my soul. Other comics artists who were great influences included Steranko, Wrightson, and Barry Windsor-Smith.

Another big influence was book cover art. Here again, Steranko was an early inspiration, along with Frazetta (of course), Bama (Doc Savage!), Drew Struzan, and the Hildebrandts. As I got a little older, I discovered the Golden Age of illustration, and fell in love with N.C. Wyeth, as well as Pyle, Loomis, Rackham, Parrish, and the others.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?

A: I'll have to get back to that question after I have one... I suppose right now my greatest success is just having been able to make a living at it for several years!

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?

A: As far as art goes, of course the computer has changed things completely and forever. Very little art never touches a computer - even "hand drawn" or painted art is scanned, cleaned, color corrected. As much as I love to paint, I can't see ever doing a painting that doesn't have at least a bit of clean-up anymore. And when a client wants a change, you KNOW it's going to be done in the computer, and not through the laborious process of re-painting and re-photographing.

Fantasy and SF Art is also getting more and more technically accomplished. I think the days are gone where an artist with nothing more than a wild imagination and a little skill can get steady work. Because of the internet, Publishers can see all the best artists from all over the world now, so they only want the best. At the same time, the skill level is rising as artists can study the art and techniques from all the greats, again using the internet. In addition, as





Fantasy and SF become mainstream, more artists see these as viable outlets for their talent.

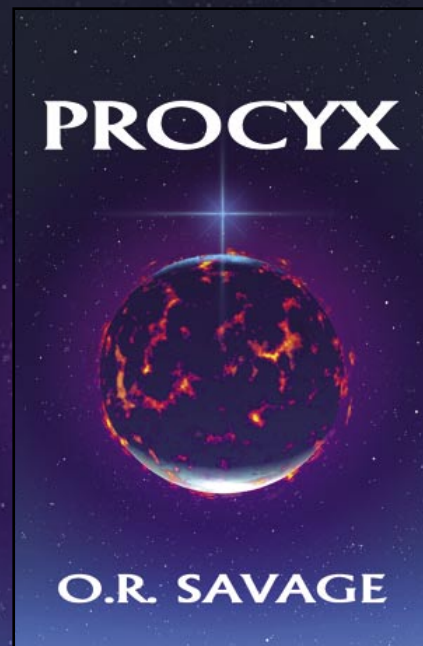
Add to that the fact that more and more artists are getting a real education in realistic art (which was nearly impossible for around thirty years in the late 20th century, as art schools concentrated on abstract theory rather than technique), and the net effect is an amazing profusion of talented and skilled artists, the likes of which our genre has never seen. It's an amazing time for Fantastic art, and I'm glad to be a small part of it!

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Me, George and the Dragon

By Maria Ott Tatham

Call me *Sir* Reginald, please. How did I come by my title? What is my pedigree? My Sires were already here when the mastiffs of Rome invaded . . . *actually*, it was my master George who knighted me himself, at a ceremony just for the two of us. I was snoring on my back by the fire, his foot on my chest, while he downed his ale. Harumph. How I love the smell of his hose.

He said, "Up, Reggie."

I sat and lifted my ears. He lifted his sword and smiled at me with houndishly beautiful eyes. His drooping mustaches rose as he said, with brew on his breath, "For canine valor (above and beyond), unswerving, impeccable devotion—and a grip like death, I knight thee, Sir Reginald Dogsby."

When he slowly brought down the steel, I cringed at the scent of fresh blood. He tapped my shoulder, and I rose to all fours and wagged.

* * *

Wendy tried to coax me away from the window with dinner. I glanced at her, then stared back at the road. Where was George? It was dark and he wasn't home; no sight, sound, or smell of him. I lay my head on the sill. The moon rose, then began to fall. At last I spotted a glint of moonlight on metal. I whined as a breeze brought a whiff of George's oily hair . . . *singed* by *fire*. I bounded out, and Wendy followed.

George's armor hung on his tired horse. He kissed Wendy and patted my head. The smell on him raised my hackles. Wendy took his hand, and the three of us walked back to the keep.

I longed to lick George's wounds, but Wendy washed them. As she dabbed at a cut, she asked, "Is it *dead*?"

"No."

She patted his shoulder. "Perhaps next time."

He blew his breath out through his mustache. "Right-o."

George sat in his chair for days. I knew if he'd only lie down on the rug he'd feel better. I scratched it into a pile and lay down myself.

He opened a book, poked a finger at it and said, "Hah, I *see*. That is how Sir Robert Fortesque managed the problem the last time . . . left off his armor. Hmm, he didn't want to be cooked in the intense heat . . . *and* he took his dog Toby with him. Reggie, are you listening?"

I went to George's chair. What did he mean? I swallowed my drool and settled my chin on his shoulder. It all looked like pigeon prints and droppings to me. What was this about his dog? I huffed, and he turned the page. My eyebrows rose at the sight of something like a fat English adder, coiled to strike, shooting flames at a tiny bit of a bloke like George, standing in only his hose and jerkin, gripping a sword too small for him. I cocked my head. The bloke had his snip of

I swallowed my drool and settled my chin on his shoulder. It all looked like pigeon prints and droppings to me.

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Betsy Mitchell

Interview

Betsy Mitchell is the editor-in-chief of Del Rey Books, the largest fantasy and sci-fi publisher. Prior to joining Del Rey in 2002, she was editor-in-chief of Aspect, an associate publisher at Bantam Spectra, and senior editor at Baen Books. She joined the world of fantasy publishing as a reporter for the Omaha World-Herald. Welcome to Deep Magic, Betsy!

Q: You've been editor-in-chief at Del Rey for two years now. What are some of the things you've learned in your experience at Del Rey over the last two years?

A: It's been terrific to work at a house that has been a success for more than 25 years. My first book-publishing job was at Baen Books, which was just being established at that time--I was Jim Baen's first employee. And working on a start-up like that was a different kind of fascinating experience, a great way to learn from the ground up. But so many things are simpler at a big, successful line. We have more back up on the publicity and promotion side, meaning we can provide better services to our authors. We're the only SF/fantasy house to own its own display booth, which we use at conventions such as the San Diego Comic-Con, Star Wars Celebration, Wizard World, etc. (Boy, was I jealous of that booth before I worked here!) The biggest challenge is not to buy every project we can afford to buy, because our list would balloon out of control.

Q: Because of your experience working for many of the major fantasy publishers, what kinds of transformations have you seen happen in the publishing industry? Any predictions for the future?

A: When I came into the book business, it was still barely possible to read most of the important new releases each year. So many good writers were coming into the field in the early '80s, and others who emerged in the '60s and '70s were reaching maturity in their work. It's no different today: numerous excellent new voices can be found. What *is* different is that it's harder for them to break in and, even once published, make an impact on the general public, because of the huge number of titles that are being brought out each year. I keep waiting for some publishing house to graciously bow out of the competition, for somebody to say, "The field is publishing too many titles--I'll drop out and leave some shelf space open for the rest of you." Funny how that doesn't seem to happen!

Q: How has the internet changed the publishing world (its interactions with you and your authors)?

A: It's the greatest tool I've ever seen for encouraging word of mouth about authors. Fan websites, author home pages, Amazon and other sites that run reader feedback, online SF/fantasy magazines, internet newsletters--all of these have broadened our outreach to readers in their homes and enabled them to talk to each other and share their enthusiasm about books and authors. The Del Rey Internet Newsletter has more than 43,000 subscribers! Once a month we send them the basic info on every book we have coming out, plus features such as author Q&As, contests, advance copy giveaways, etc. A number of our authors have individual mailing lists as well, run out of their own home pages.

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Q: Has the success of the LORD OF THE RINGS movies had any effect on sales at Del Rey?

A: I think the movies may be having an impact on young readers. We've seen huge sales of *The Hobbit* in school reading lists, and even the *Lord of the Rings* boxed set has done very well in the school book club market. Perhaps the generation of young readers who will be entering college in a few years will spread its wings thanks to Tolkien. They're also being fed by a new interest on the part of YA publishers in fantasy, originally sparked by the success of *Harry Potter*. Christopher Paolini's *ERAGON* has been a huge success this year for Knopf, and they're looking for more titles. Penguin's "Firebird" line is also a success, I understand. We launched the Del Rey Imagine program to meet that demand--reissuing some of our classic titles in digest-size format with cover art targeted to readers 12-up, and it's been well received.

Q: Scifi.com announced on their website that Ursula Le Guin's EARTHSEA trilogy will be made into a miniseries. Are any Del Rey authors (like the famous Terry Brooks or David Eddings) in negotiations for movies or miniseries as well?

A: First to reach the big screen will be "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," which Buena Vista is scheduling for mid-2005. Also under development is Piers Anthony's "On a Pale Horse," which Top Cow Productions is working on with Disney. Terry Brooks' "Magic Kingdom" series is in the negotiation stages. And we've sold the movie rights to Stephen Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant* series. A bright future for fantasy!

Q: Does Del Rey have plans to blur the lines between different entertainment media?

A: Our media tie-in list is an important part of Del Rey. Other publishers may look down on "tie-ins," but they can be projects to be proud of--witness our *Star Wars* "Essential Guides" list, our beautiful making-of volumes on such movies as *Spider-Man* and *XMen 2*, and our *New York Times* bestselling *Star Wars* fiction program. We don't generate the games or movies or TV shows, but we're happy to create quality books for fans. We're embarrassed about tie-ins all the way to the bank....

Q: Many of our readers are ambitious writers of the genre too. What is it about fantasy and science fiction that has this effect on people?

A: SF/fantasy readers are, by and large, frighteningly intelligent people. Their skulls cannot contain the ideas roiling about within. They must put them down on paper! :)

Q: What advice do you like to give budding authors on getting published in today's market? (Your own shortlist of "7 Habits of Highly Effective Writers")

A:

1. Make friends with people in the business by attending conventions or writers' conferences, chatting them up on their websites, whatever you can think of just to get yourself known before you pounce. If you can't obtain an agent, which is sometimes the toughest job of all, a recommendation from an established author or big-name fan can often get you in an editor's door.
2. Finish a complete story, or novel, before you try to submit it. First-timers have to prove they can bring a project to conclusion.
3. Once you get the opportunity, don't waste it. Make your manuscript THE BEST

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IT CAN BE before you submit it to anyone.

4. Be persistent. If your first manuscript doesn't sell, but you still feel the need to write, start something new.

5. If short fiction comes easily to you, build a publishing "resume" by selling to the fiction mags. Our field is lucky to have several still in operation.

Q: Do you think that digital print technology (like Xerox's print-on demand technology) will ever be a viable (and I mean cost-competitive) alternative to traditional offset printing?

A: I think POD will succeed only if people's standards of quality fall. The interior pages can be fine, although the type designs are usually nothing to swoon over, but the covers I've seen are almost universally poorly conceived, laid out, and produced. Some books are available in no other fashion, and certainly POD is a great boon in cases like that, but I've not seen any POD title that I'd be proud to shelve.

Q: What do you feel is your greatest success in your career? What accomplishment are you proud of most?

A: Starting at Warner Books, I worked hard to find and promote "authors of color." We repackaged all of Octavia Butler's titles and brought her to a new level of appreciation. We discovered Nalo Hopkinson and Ashok K. Banker, and signed up some very interesting projects by Steven Barnes. Here at Del Rey we found first-novelist Minister Faust, whose COYOTE KINGS OF THE SPACE-AGE BACHELOR PAD will be published in August. I think my proudest moment was when DARK MATTER: A CENTURY OF SPECULATIVE FICTION FROM THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, edited by Sheree R. Thomas, won the World Fantasy Award for Best Anthology. It was the first anthology ever of speculative fiction by black writers.

Cohesion Lost

By Darrell Newton

"History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, however, if faced with courage, need not be lived again."

~ Maya Angelou

"The history of our race, and each individual's experience, are sown thick with evidence that a truth is not hard to kill and that a lie told well is immortal."

~ Mark Twain

"The good news is," I said, "it's not cancer."

Jana, my wife of six years, sat across the dinning room table. A long day of worry had frizzled her shoulder-length brown hair, and dark circles shadowed her beautiful brown eyes. Now that the boys were asleep, any pretense of practicing English had been put aside so we spoke in Serbian. "And the bad news?"

I tried to smile, but I could feel it was forced. The war scar tugged on my right cheek. "He told me to see a specialist, because he doesn't know what it is."

"And how are we going to pay for this?" I could see Jana's frustration in the way she rubbed her knuckles. She would rather stay at home with me and our two boys than work her night job as a custodian. It was beneath her. She didn't have a degree, but had taken some university-level classes. She deserved better.

"I'm not going to go." I couldn't. I felt frustration burn with hints of rage. I should be able to provide for us all. A Master's Degree in Mechanical Engineering should have landed me a better job than a mechanic at Pulson's Garage, but my degree was from the Czech Technical University in Prague, which didn't carry much clout in a depressed American economy. We had been in this country as refugees for a year now, and I had long since canvassed the local prospects with my resume. The few interviews that resulted brought only frustration. *Alexander*, they would say, *you don't have enough experience in this country*. But I knew it was because of my heavy accent. Even out of state opportunities hadn't yielded results, not even negative ones.

"What if it's serious?"

"It's not."

"It's not?" Tears rolled down her cheeks. "How can you say that with this ... this tingling you have? Sometimes you can't feel your fingers. You try to hide it, but I see you rubbing them and shaking your hands. It scares me, Alex. And it's affecting your mind too."

"What do you mean? You married me for my mind. It couldn't have been my looks." I gave her my most endearing smile, trying to take the edge off the conversation.

"It's not funny." Her voice tightened. "When you woke up yesterday, you couldn't even

But, like the other images, these brought with them their associated memories just outside conscious reach.

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Page Turners Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

[Deep Magic Book Reviews website](#)

Editor's Choice: Classic Fantasy

Phantastes

by George MacDonald



There are two basic types of works that fall under the title 'classic': those that are, after all the years, fun to read, and those that have been and still are incredibly influential on the genre. The best of the classics are those that are both. George MacDonald's *Phantastes* comes close to being one of these latter works.

There should be no doubt that *Phantastes* was influential. A young C.S. Lewis, long before he was one of the biggest names in literature, came across a copy at a railway station bookseller. He describes his first reading as a baptism of the imagination. 'A few hours later I knew I had crossed a great frontier,' Lewis writes in his preface to *Phantastes*. Yes, it was this book that showed Lewis the realms of the imagination that constitute good fantastic literature. And thus, since Lewis went on to write the Chronicles of Narnia, it can be said to be the grandfather of much of modern fantasy. (And, incidentally, the grandfather of Deep Magic, since our

name was inspired by the Chronicles of Narnia.)

Phantastes can be best categorized by its subtitle, 'A Faerie Romance.' That is not to say that it is a love story, but that it is about the soul soaring above hardship and becoming great.

Phantastes is the picaresque story of one Anodos, a young man who finds himself in fairyland and trying to find meaning and purpose. There isn't a plot structure in the contemporary sense of the word, but a series of episodes as Anodos journeys to find his purpose in fairyland. Along his path, he meets up with a myriad of characters, from tree spirits to his own sinister shadow. It is this latter 'character' that really brings out the major theme of the book -- a longing for death. This is not, however, some morbid Goth 'the world sucks and I wanna die' depression, but a desire to move beyond this world to a greater world. Anodos, though, learns his place and purpose and thus, though longing, remains.

MacDonald is not known for writing easy prose. In his non-fantastical books, he uses authentic Scottish dialect. Thankfully, he does not do so here. In fact, *Phantastes* also avoids MacDonald's penchant for plodding prose. Throughout the descriptions are as light and ephemeral as the fairyland Anodos is traversing. But still, the lack of plot (even though there is a motivating action) can make this book a bit of a task to get through in sections for the modern reader. Take it in bits, read a chapter a night, and before you know it, you'll be through this slim book and grateful for the experience.

Possible objectionable material: none

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

Dragons of Autumn Twilight

By Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman



Just one of several in the Dragon Lance series of books written by these authors and many others, this book is the first in a trilogy of 'Dragon' books. It begins by

continued on next page

introducing the world of Krynn and a society that has been broken apart and scattered after a great cataclysm, the premise being that the old gods have abandoned the people. A legend remains of a knight, Huma, who was given a powerful dragon lance weapon by the old gods and used it to destroy dragons that had plagued the world before the cataclysm. Omnipotent narration reveals eight main characters, six of which already have a history together. The main story opens with a stranger rearranging furniture in a tavern in Solace, followed by the appearance of three main characters: Flint the dwarf; Tanis, a half-elf; and Tasslehoff who is a “kender,” a race slightly elfin like, short in stature, and utterly without fear. The three encounter each other and a hobgoblin on their way to the tavern, where they and four others vowed to meet after five years. They learn all is not well in Solace and that a search is on for a mysterious blue crystal staff.

Upon entering the tavern they meet with the twins Raistlin and Caramon and learn Raistlin has undergone trials to become a mage at the expense of his health and appearance while Caramon remains the warrior they knew five years ago. Tika, a bar maid, brings news that the twin’s sister cannot come. The final member of their party, Sturm, a knight of Huma’s now fallen-from-grace order, enters with two strangers naming themselves Goldmoon and Riverwind, of a people considered barbarian. The stranger starts a row with Solace’s resident ruler, revealing Goldmoon as the keeper of the blue crystal staff and effectively turning all but Tika and the stranger into fugitives.

Their escape from Solace leads them to discover a never before seen race on Krynn -- draconians. Subsequent flight takes the group into the depths of a buried city wherein lies a dragon, servant of the Queen of Darkness, and a revelation that the old gods remain. Imbued into Goldmoon’s staff is the power of healing and she becomes a priestess for the ancient gods of good. From the buried city they return to Solace to find their homes destroyed and become prisoners to be sent to slave mines begun by leaders of the draconian invasion. Tika joins them along with Gilthanas, an elf and Tanis’ foster brother, and Fizban, a magician who isn’t quite as flighty as he seems. The elves free them and take the group back to their city where Gilthanas’ sister, Laurana, is introduced.

They find that the peril is increased: the elves are being forced into leaving while the draconian leaders and the dragons have conquered the cities to the north. To protect the elves, Tanis leads the original seven along with Gilthanas, Tika, and, unbeknownst to him, Laurana, to the slave mines to challenge the priest of the Queen of Darkness and save those imprisoned there. Along the way secrets and hints of the characters’ pasts are revealed. The companions are separated and betrayed, and something of the truth of how Huma defeated the dragons of old emerges.

The authors create a complex storyline with a large, yet interesting array of characters. The first introduction of the characters may seem a little odd since the effect is similar to being dropped into the middle of the story. The authors do a good job, though, of recovering and giving enough information to make one feel more at home with this world and the characters. The omniscient point of view, while nicely done, does have faults that show through in various places, detracting from the smooth flow and pace of the narrative. There are instances of such sudden transition that it takes a moment to realize the characters are no longer in the same place/situation/condition they were in a moment ago. Areas of unrealized potential appear where the authors could have delved more into the characters, their cultures, and interactions; one such occurs between Tanis and Riverwind where a tip of realization just ends with the paragraph. Often the profundity is sacrificed to move the story along; thus the readers, while allowed to grow close to the characters, aren’t given the full opportunity to experience each character’s story. Occasionally with omnipotent narration it becomes apparent that the author is trying to hide something from the reader and this happens, in particular as the group’s betrayer appears on the scene. The storyline develops an almost melodramatic flavor and takes on a sadly predictable state at times, the reader being reassured by the authors themselves with the narration ‘in later years’ -- giving away that the character is not going to die, making those dangerous scenes much less threatening.

The story invokes a curiosity as to what will happen in the future books, but the emptiness of the missed interactions creates a lacking in character depth. The obvious attempt to hide things from the reader by changing character point of view, or blatantly not

continued on next page

revealing what a character knows while in the characters point of view, may stir slight feelings of annoyance.

Possible objectionable material: includes language and suggestive scenes.

(Reviewed by J.W. Wrenn)

Book Review: Sci-Fi

Arena

by Karen Hancock



Callie Hayes is typical of her generation: out of college, she can't seem to find any purpose for her life and is drifting. Her best friend, Meg, has talked her into being a human guinea pig for a psychological experiment. Callie volunteers, but she quickly discovers that the intentions of the experimenters is not what she was led to believe. Told that Callie would need to find her way through a maze, she actually finds herself transported to a strange, alien world that seems to conspire against her. Originally told to stay on the white path, Callie soon finds that all but impossible to do. Almost as soon as she enters the alien world --(the Arena of the title) -- the strange and deadly beasts of that world beset her. Luckily, she comes across another human who helps her to survive her first few days. Soon she falls in with a band of humans attempting to survive in this strange world. However, because it was deception that brought her here, Callie is not sure of whom to trust: the aliens who brought her there, but who seemed to want her best, or the humans who have been as deceived as her but who seem to have their own agenda? While trying to decide whom to trust, Callie also finds herself having to determine how many of the aliens' instructions are valid and worth following. Should she attempt to find the gates scattered around the Arena that will lead her home? How do they work, and how does one get into them?

Callie eventually reaches a gate, goes through, and her adventure then begins in earnest as she has to fight her way through the second level of the Arena to find her

way home.

The publisher, Bethany House, promoted this book as an allegory. One of the cover blurbs compares it to a cross between *Pilgrim's Progress* and "The Matrix," which is a very apt description. Bethany House is a Christian publisher and it is indeed possible to read *The Arena* as symbolic of the Christian walk, just like *Pilgrim's Progress*. One problem, however, is that this book is not an allegory in the traditional senses of the word, and that's where comparisons with "The Matrix" come in handy. The world of the Arena is not quite what it seems, but neither are there direct parallels as one would find in an allegory. Indeed, if one tries to read the book as an allegory, it fails miserably, for there is quite a bit of story that is there for the sake of story, something that allegory doesn't lend itself to. Rather, one should treat the book as an extended metaphor of the Christian walk.

But if you're not a Christian, don't let the book's theological bent put you off. Like Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there is plenty here to provide enjoyment, no matter where you are coming from. However, unlike Narnia, the world of the Arena seems to be constructed first with an eye toward the symbolism and secondarily with an eye toward good story, so it doesn't succeed in entertaining quite as well as Narnia does. Nonetheless, I recommend *The Arena* as an enjoyable read and a good clean fantasy.

Possible objectionable material: none really, although there are a few scenes of violence that might be much for some.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy

New Spring: The Novel

by Robert Jordan



Robert Jordan's "The Wheel of Time" has been turning since 1989, which seems like an age long past to

continued on next page

many faithful fans awaiting the end of this currently ten book epic. In a recent internet chat, Jordan suggested he might be able to finish the series with two more books. However, while readers await the celebratory feast of that concluding novel, Jordan has given fans a tasty snack in the form of a short story stretched into a full-length, though short by Jordan standards, novel prequel to the series.

Years before Moiraine Sedai makes her way to the Two Rivers at Bel Tine and Sivan Sanche sits as Amyrlin Seat in Tar Valon, the two women are best friends, accepted in training at the White Tower, and serious troublemakers. While on duty within the Amyrlin's chambers, they overhear a foreboding foretelling by a highly respected Aes Sedai that the Dragon is reborn on the slopes of Dragonmount. The Dragon is the legendary man predestined to face the Dark One in the final battle and determine the fate of humankind. The various factions within the Aes Sedai seek him for a myriad of reasons, but all hope to gain some measure of control -- for a man who can channel the "one power" is doomed to madness if left on his own. War abounds in the region around Tar Valon, but the Aes Sedai, including accepteds, who are not yet raised to full-sister Aes Sedai, are sent on missions to gather the names of every child born near the time of the foretelling. Moiraine and Sivan are two of the few who know the real purpose of the quest. Soon, those who know the truth begin dying off one at a time, including the Amyrlin Seat, herself.

Moiraine and Sivan cannot wait to be raised to full sister so they may leave the White Tower and search for the Dragon. Yet, just when they pass the test and are raised to full sisters, Moiraine learns that several members of her family, who rule Cairhein, have suddenly died, leaving her with a legitimate claim for the throne. Moiraine knows that the Aes Sedai plan to make sure she obtains the throne and stretch their political power into that nation. Moiraine disobeys a direct order by the Amyrlin Seat and flees the tower to search for the Dragon. Along the way, she meets Lan, who dunks her in a pond upon meeting her. She enlists him and his comrades to assist her as she travels to search for a woman who gave birth to a child that just might be the Dragon reborn. Lan has troubles of his own, and wears the heavy burden of a secret mantle -- King of Malkier.

The closer Moiraine gets to the woman, the darker

the plot becomes, with more Aes Sedai disappearing or dying. She and Sivan suspect a faction of Aes Sedai, called the Black Ajah, which is believed to not exist, must be responsible for the deaths. Clearly, the Black Ajah, who serve the Dark One know that the Dragon must be reborn as well. The race to find him, and survive, becomes Moiraine's quest and destiny.

Where Jordan has failed in recent "Wheel of Time" novels to engage readers by delivering a story that moves through a plot line, in *The New Spring*, he succeeds in regaining some of the magic and fire of the earlier books. Fans who have missed Moiraine will delight in seeing her and many other familiar faces among the Aes Sedai. Moiraine and Lan have wonderful chemistry, as do Moiraine and Sivan. The cast of characters is large, which works just fine for those who already know two-thirds of the characters from reading the series. However, even first-time Jordan readers will enjoy this story for its rich descriptions, that do not consume nearly so many lines as they have in recent "Wheel of Time" novels. I would advise reading the series first, or at least the first novel, *The Eye of the World*, before a reader picks up *New Spring*. But if the size of the series seems daunting, this book will give a new reader a nice flavor for Robert Jordan's style and story telling. Long-time Jordan fans, or even former Jordan fans who have given the series up for its length and molasses pace, will greatly enjoy this short novel. It packs a powerful climax found lacking in other recent Jordan works; it also offers significant insight into the series in the Epilogue—an absolute must read. I found the novel compelling and a real pleasure to read.

Possible objectionable material: very little, a bit of fantasy violence, some less than pure thoughts, mature interludes are hinted at, and a bit of nudity exists within the structure of the Aes Sedai testing, but nothing graphic.

(Reviewed by Brendon Taylor)

continued on next page

Book Review: Science Fiction

PartnerShip

by Anne McCaffrey and Margaret Ball



Nancia is a brainship preparing to depart for her first assignment. A brainship is a spaceship whose functions are powered by a human brain. Children born with deformities and unable to live without support have the opportunity to have their minds connected to mechanical "bodies". The mind is connected to computers that run the new body, in Nancia's case, a spaceship. A brainship is superior to even the most advanced ships powered by artificial intelligence.

Nancia's first assignment is to escort a group of new graduates to their first jobs. The behavior of the graduates upon boarding Nancia is so appalling that she chooses not to introduce herself to them. Unaware that she is a brainship, they discuss illegal schemes and plan to meet to evaluate their successes.

Nancia drops them off at their various planets

and then picks up her brawn (a human partner for brainships), Caleb. Nancia asks Caleb hypothetically about reporting hearing criminal plans, and he is plainly disgusted by the idea of eavesdropping on passengers. Nancia adopts his moral view in practice, but continues to be troubled about the situation.

PartnerShip follows the careers of the five scheming graduates as well as Nancia's adventures as a Courier Service ship. Nancia's job will bring her back to revisit the graduates she dropped off on her first voyage.

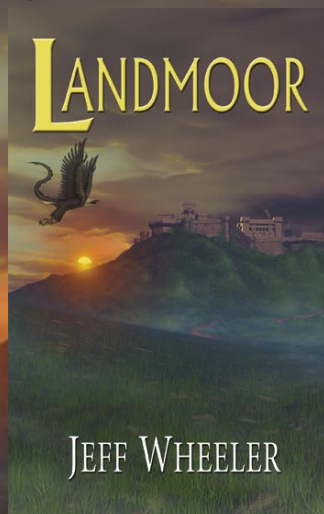
I found PartnerShip fun and interesting to read. McCaffrey and Ball touch on some moral issues, which I enjoy. I think, however, that the characters in this book lack depth and humanity. This bothered me because one of the issues in the book is the moral gray area between right and wrong, and I thought that the characters should have been written in keeping with this theme.

Possible Objectionable Material: memories of sexual abuse, sexual situations, and evil characters that do horrific things. None of these are terribly graphic, but you certainly get the idea.

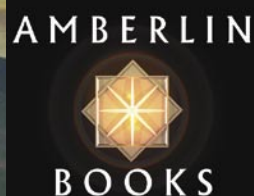
(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)

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A Place By the Fire

By Michael Graves

A cold west wind whistled through the makeshift camp, the first flakes of winter snow beginning to fall. The small convoy of wagons was drawn up in a circle, as much for shelter from the weather as for protection against attack by bandits. Wagon drivers, guardsmen and merchants vied with each other for the best seats around the blazing fire at the circle's centre. Joints of meat were roasted and wine skins passed from hand to eager hand. Jokes and tales were exchanged.

One man kept his distance from the blazing logs and camaraderie, preferring the cold and solitude. His reluctance was noticed and taken for uncertainty. A kindly merchant, huddled within his fur-lined robes, beckoned the stranger to join them.

"Come my friend, there is room aplenty for all. No need to freeze to death. Besides, the ground is too hard for us to be digging a hole for you, should you die over there!"

The stranger, hooded and cloaked, shook his head as he declined the offer. He had kept to himself during the long journey, answering a few questions when spoken to but generally shunning any companionship. The merchant, belly warmed by food and drink, would consider no refusal, insisting that the stranger join them.

"Come now. Surely our company is good enough for you. We have entertained you with our wit. It would be churlish to refuse our hospitality. In fact it's about time you took a turn at providing some entertainment for your fellow travelers yourself, I think!"

His exhortations were echoed by his companions, a chorus of drunken encouragement directed at the reluctant stranger.

Not wishing to appear ungrateful, or to provoke good-natured complaints into more confrontational actions, he bowed his hooded head in agreement, limping forward from the shadows.

"Very well. I shall tell you a tale of my own. It is a story of friendship and honour, of love and betrayal. But before I speak, if you would be so kind, my throat is dry. If I must exercise it tonight then I would welcome a drink."

The merchant, his wide face broken by a beaming smile of triumph, tossed a wine skin towards the new storyteller who caught it neatly in the slender fingers of his left hand.

One man kept his distance from the blazing logs and camaraderie, preferring the cold and solitude. His reluctance was noticed and taken for uncertainty.

* * *

There were two men once, both young and proud, both heirs to their own kingdoms. One was the son of a King, prince of a western land, while the other was the son of a Caliph of the Great Desert. They first met when Hamet Ibn Al'Rezzani was sent by his father to study at the court of King Rufain, to learn the ways of the west and foster peace and trade between the two

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Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay

By Keri Stevenson

Part One of the Orlathian Trilogy

Prologue Destinies

324 OR, Early Autumn

“Step forward, my Prince Hanir, my Princess Emmeldra.”

Pheron stood at his mother’s side and watched his older brother and sister walk toward the far side of the cave. Hanir looked as if he were gliding, Emmeldra as if she were dancing. They always looked like that, Pheron thought. The Destiny they walked toward, as twins, prince and princess, and Scarlet mages, gave them a grace and strength most others lacked.

The priestess tending the fire stepped back, her head tilted to the side, her long gray hair falling around her face. Pheron watched as she watched Hanir and Emmeldra, and noted the little smile on her face. Well, she might smile now. His brother and sister had a Destiny.

“Stretch out your hands to the fire and accept what it gives you,” the priestess instructed in a dramatic whisper that Pheron could hardly hear. The cry of a bird outside the cave didn’t make this any easier.

Hanir put out his hand. Emmeldra was a breath behind. Their skin shone in the flames, the red, shifting shades seeming to get behind the white and outline it. Intense gold-flecked green eyes fell shut, and the twins leaned forward at the same time, their red hair tumbling around their faces, obscuring their features even more. Pheron could feel the tension of his mother, Queen Annilda, beside him, though she didn’t move and didn’t remove her gaze from her eldest son and her daughter.

The fire roared up, and its flames, green-tinted since the priestess had tossed a handful of powdered *dyanse* on them, turned a vivid red. Hanir and Emmeldra opened their eyes and stepped back at the same time, their arms wreathed in flames that did not burn their skin. Pheron heard gasps and applause from behind him and rolled his eyes. The watching nobles had known that was going to happen. Why did they insist on acting surprised?

The old woman came forward and laid a hand on Emmeldra’s face. Pheron wondered why. The dark twinkle in her eyes had proven she could see their features.

“Your Destiny is strong all about you,” she whispered to the princess. “That I can sense. But what you will fall to...will it be Dark, or will it be Light?”

Pheron yawned as the applause followed. The prophecies were even worse than usual.

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see the terrifying hut, the witch's hut, nestled quietly in the center of the clearing just beyond the last of the dead trees.

Beside him the forest was alive with shadows, the ground crawling and shifting at their passing. Above and between them the terrible, moaning wind blew snow into phantasms that danced and played beneath the moon's cold gaze before they were scattered and destroyed.

"Easy, my friend," Vainamoinen whispered over the wind, close to the courser's drawn back ears. Tursas had been with him when he journeyed to Pohjola to steal back the magical Sampo from his great enemy Louhi, Sorceress of the North, and when he slew the Great Fish and fashioned from its mighty jaws his *kantele*. Tursas had been with him when he left the world of men and wandered, for a time, the Land of the Dead. Vainamoinen knew well it was not the beast's *own* fear that unsteadied its hooved feet.

"It is well," Vainamoinen whispered, his voice soothing. "Let not an old man's fear make you doubt." Beneath him, like so many times before, Tursas grew still. "Ah, my brave, brave friend. One more time into evil's heart we journey. Shall you carry me still?"

And Tursas did carry him. Through biting wind and blowing snow, through midnight shadows and the lonely night, Tursas carried him beyond the last of the skeleton trees and into the clearing, that he might right a great wrong and retrieve the Water of Life from the most terrible witch of all.

* * *

From within her impossible mortar, fully at home among the frozen, shadowy recesses of the primeval forest, she watched him. Gangly and gnarled, she was like a dead tree, or a spider. The wicked wind ripped at her tattered shawl, tore at the tufts of her stringy grey hair. In one knotted hand was her broom, hardly thinner than the emaciated arm that held it, a few bits of yellow straw clinging desperately to its end. In the other was her stone pestle. Her carrion, rheumy gaze split the darkness like a dagger, cut through the wailing snow, the whipping, frenzied wind, fixed on the invader in her forest.

She had known he was coming, had been warned. The shadows spoke often; one had only to listen. They told her of this man, whispered tales of his deeds, his courage. They feared him, she knew. All the powers of the Dark feared this man.

A mistake had brought him to her, at the last, a tragedy that the forest sang. But he would not suffer that mistake. What pride and desperation had sundered, his power would mend. In the stories she heard it was always so.

From the midnight shadows of the forest that was her own, Baba Jaga Kostianaya Noga, called 'Bony Legs', cackled with glee. With a whispered word her mortar carried her silently over the snow-covered ground, her broom trailing behind, improbably, impossibly, obscuring her tracks. Tracks that would have led any foolish enough to have attempted to follow them toward her hut: where she would greet her guest.

* * *

Perched atop a demon's leg, nestled behind a picket fence of human bone, the hut was the most terrifying thing Vainamoinen had ever seen. He had heard tales, of course, stories about the hut and its abominable single leg. He had thought the stories preposterous. Even if they

were true, how could one fear something so . . . ridiculous?

Now he understood. It was the bizarreness, the absolute wrongfulness of the place. He felt small of a sudden, fragile in the face of so much evil.

The hut had its back to him, waiting. In the freezing wind it swayed gently like a rotting flower. The wood that formed the hut's sides was split and cracked. The single, hideous leg that held it off the ground was thin and scaled and clawed, clenching the earth with a strangling hold. No snow gathered beneath the hut where that claw gripped, no ice. Nothing, not even nature itself it seemed, might loosen that profane grasp. Above, the henna shingles of the wood-slatted roof were pitted and broken. A pair of black swans rested there, huge shadows among the shadows. They turned their long, serpentine necks and fixed him with unblinking eyes.

Before the hut the sepulchral fence creaked and swayed. The hollow-eyed skulls that topped the fence stared at him, screamed silent warnings. The gate, too, was made of bone, the lock a sharp-toothed mouth, the bolt a single, skeletal hand. Sitting silently before the monstrous gate, licking a chilled paw, was a black cat. At his approach the cat turned and stood before it stalked away into the shadows.

As he stared at the hut, sought to understand it, the moon's stark light seemed less than it had been, the shadows deeper, colder.

"So much evil," Vainamoinen whispered. Then, reaching over his shoulder, the greatest wizard in the world drew forth his *kantele*. He laid the ancient harp in his lap and plucked the strings.

Life forbidden, where Death and Entropy are all.

Then he began to sing.

* * *

She watched him enter the clearing, watched him pause, smelled his fear.

Amid the silence of the clearing the swans waited, and the cat. The fence and the hut waited as well. They all waited for her. She could feel their impatience, sense their fear. Fear of this man, this bane of evil, who had found them at last. Silently she drew closer. She could see him clearly now, his tall, proud form, his streaming breath. His beard poured down the front of his red cloak, a cloak pulled low over eyes that she still could not see. Eyes, the shadows told her, which contained all the knowledge in the world.

Nearer now, to the edge of the clearing. She knew that even the beast could not sense her, not here, in this place. The steed, Tursas, would feed her own beasts for days. While the wizard...the wizard would be hers.

With a smile that split her pockmarked face, she shifted closer, readied herself.

Saw him reach around, draw forth his instrument. Then Baba Jaga Kostianaya Noga, the Dancer on the Gravestones, heard the wizard sing. And she understood at last why this man was so terribly feared by the Dark.

* * *

In a voice unmatched in all the long history of the Earth, Vainamoinen the Wise sang of Light. Bright, keening words fell from the air, and the earth shifted beneath him. Far into the woods the ancient trees trembled. Enraged, the wind rose in answer, sought to flay the wizard's

song with ice and snow and cast it away forever. But its insufferable moaning was drowned beneath the brilliant, scintillating notes.

Within the haunted clearing shadows twisted and writhed like a man in pain, began to wither and ebb. And the moon's light shone brightly down.

Beneath the harsh, argent light, above the soaring glory of the words, the tormented hut screamed, spun round and round on its hideous, malformed leg until the swans were cast from its roof, taking to the skies where they faded as the other shadows faded.

The bone fence too, suffered. Moaning, quaking, its ivory jaws clattered as the empty eyes of the dead flashed incarnadine, a thousand wretched souls fighting the wizard's words.

His words of Light.

And then he stopped. Before him, Vainamoinen's ragged breath escaped into the night where it was seized and rent by the wind. Staring at the quivering hut, the trembling, quavering fence, Vainamoinen said quietly, "Shall I sing your hut to pieces, Baba Jaga Bony Legs? And your fence? Shall I rend every shadow cast by every tree in this forest? Or shall you come to me, now?"

"Turn wizard," said Baba Jaga, "I am here. I am always here."

Vainamoinen did turn then, and for the first time in their long, long lives, the steely eyes of the wizard met the malevolent gaze of the witch.

They were of a height, wizard and witch, he atop his steed of war, she nestled within the confines of her impossible mortar. For a moment they stood thus, frozen. Then Baba Jaga's carrion gaze shifted, ever so slightly.

And Tursas reared.

Caught unawares, Vainamoinen was thrown from the maddened beast, cast from its broad back as the swans were cast from the hut. He landed hard on the frozen earth, stunned. Through the heaving gasps of his white breath, the blinding pain in his arm and leg, he watched Tursas flee the clearing, rush headlong into the night.

All about him the shadows grew, stretched forth spindly fingers.

Stretching out fingers of his own, Vainamoinen sought his *kantele*. In its stead he found frozen earth and snow. Confused, he glanced to his side. The harp was not there.

"There, wizard," cackled Baba Jaga, "your instrument, it is there." Pointing with her stony pestle, Baba Jaga indicated a place far removed from where Vainamoinen lay. Around the wondrous instrument the black cat sulked, its amber eyes boring into Vainamoinen.

"What shall you do now, I wonder?" said Baba Jaga, her mortar gliding forward over the frozen earth. "Bereft of his songs, what shall the word-mage do?"

Vainamoinen stared up at the ancient, smiling hag. He saw the stone pestle in one hand, her broom being dragged behind her with the other. The stringy tufts of her hair billowed around her wretched face like a nest of adders. Her nose, he saw, was long and thin, curled under like the beak of some foul bird of prey. But it was the witch's teeth that gave him pause. Long, sharp, they were an animal's teeth, yellow and black stained. Vainamoinen had long heard the tales of Bony Legs' terrible appetites, heard the tales of the oven, forever hot, which awaited unwary visitors in her hut.

Though he was a visitor, he was by no means unwary. Nor was the *kantele* his only weapon.

Rolling quickly to his side, Vainamoinen smoothly freed his sword, Kantelvala, from its sheath hidden among the folds of his red and black cloak. The old man's breath came more

rapidly than he would have wished, and his voice, when he spoke, was not so firm as he would have liked.

"I've no wish to fight you, Crone," he said, struggling to control his breath. "I've come only to make a request, nothing more. Will you hear me?"

"A request? Foo, what could the great wizard possibly want of Baba Jaga?"

"I seek the Water of Life, to undo a great wrong. Allow me this, and you shall see me nevermore."

Behind Vainamoinen the skulls chattered.

"Foo, shall that be all you offer?"

"What more would you have?"

"I would have you speak of the great wrong, the terrible deed that brought you to me. The night is eager for the tale."

A pause. "And if I do this, if I tell you, you shall allow me the Water? On your word?"

"I shall consider it, word-mage, seek no more of me than that."

For a moment Vainamoinen too, considered. Then, over the bitter wind and blowing snow, sword leveled, eyes unflinchingly on the witch, he began his tale.

"It was the winter past. I was traveling to my homeland of Wainola, having finished work on a ship I was fashioning. Tursas was pulling my sleigh across the snow-topped heath when we came upon a bridge. Just as we began to cross, a second sled, also pulled by a single horse, stopped on the far side. A voice called out, *'I am Joukahainen of Lapland, come seeking the sage of the North.'*

"*I am he,*" I answered. *'For what reason, do you seek me out?'*

"*I am the mightiest wizard in the world,*" Joukahainen cried, *'yet, wherever I go, I hear your tales recounted. Though my great deeds far outweigh your own, though my power is without peer, still can I not escape your name. So I am come this day to enchant you, to sing you down into the snow and ice forever, that I might at last be free of your long shadow.'*

"*Sing what you know,*" I said, in answer to his challenge.

"Joukahainen began to chant then, into the wind, composing a song to show that he possessed a wizard's understanding of the world. But the black-bearded youth, so arrogant and young, sang only of surfaces and common places.

"*Sing of deeper things,*" I challenged, *'show me your knowledge.'*

"The boy's voice grew louder in anger. He said that he himself plowed the seas, raised the sky. His hand it was, that flung the infinite stars into the night."

Vainamoinen shook his head at the memory. "So much arrogance.

"*You lie,*" I said.

"Joukahainen bridled at the rebuke. *'If I cannot battle you with words, let our swords decide who is the mightier!'*

"*No,*" I answered. *'Go back to your land, learn and grow. You are unworthy.'*

"Ach," said Baba Jaga, "a terrible thing to tell a boy."

"Indeed," Vainamoinen answered. "At my words the boy grew angrier still. *'If you will not fight, I shall sing you into a swine, into a filthy, grumbling, muck-dwelling swine!'*"

Baba Jaga laughed. "Foo, foo, the boy has spirit! Mightily must you have bridled at these words."

For a moment, Vainamoinen closed his eyes, lost in memory. "Yes, Crone. At this last, I finally grew angry. Drawing forth my *kantele* I threw back my head and began to sing." The wizard shook his head. "It was . . . a powerful song. As I sang the boy cried out, *'Enough! I*

yield! But in my own arrogance, I did not heed his words. And I sang him down into the frozen earth."

"Ho," Baba Jaga cackled, "the Wizard of Light! Ho, ho!"

"Down the boy sank. First his feet, then his knees. Past his waist, past his chest. Only when the frozen earth lapped at his bearded chin did I heed his cries. *'Mighty sage, reverse the charm and spare my life. Pray you, let me pay ransom.'*

"And what will you give me, in exchange of your life?" I asked.

"Gold and boats, stallions and land, all these things, he offered me. *'I've all that, and more,'* I cried, and once again the boy began to sink.

"My sister, great wizard, I pledge to you the life and hand of my sister, Aino."

"And it was done."

"So, the mighty wizard, fearing age and loneliness, took from the youth the only thing he himself did not possess. A young life." Baba Jaga cackled. "Shall the world stop spinning, I wonder, to hear of your evil?"

Vainamoinen stared at the hag from beneath his heavy brow. "You are correct, witch. I accepted Joukahainen's offer and freed him from his doom. Then I left with him, that I might claim my prize."

"Blind, arrogant fool," Baba Jaga said. "Did you never once think of the girl?"

Vainamoinen's head dropped. So much shame. "No," he answered, "I did not.

"When we arrived at Joukahainen's home in Lapland, he took me to his sister and told her of our deal. She cried and raged at the unfairness of it all. I swore kindness to her, and love unending, but she would have none of it." Vainamoinen's voice dropped to a whisper. "She was in love, you see, with another, though I knew it not at the time. Before I could speak more, she ran from the house, mounted a steed, and fled into the woods. For hours the boy and I searched for her. We found her at last at the bottom of a river, a large rock tied about her left foot."

"Ach. Knowing that if she refused you she dishonored her brother, she knew as well that if she did agree, she dishonored her true love. Foo, what choice save death? And now you seek my Water to return her to the world she was so unjustly released from, that you might ease your own torment. How truly noble, foo. But I wonder, wizard: will she want your help?"

Vainamoinen stared at the hag. "The Water, Bony Legs. I have upheld our bargain, I have told you my tale. May I use your water?"

Baba Jaga's eyes did not leave Vainamoinen's. "You have spun a good tale wizard, but one thing more will I have of you, before I allow you to visit my beautiful pool."

Vainamoinen flinched at the words, his sword at the ready.

"You shall compose for me a song of your deed, that I might sing it each night. A reminder to the world forever that there is darkness, even in light. That is my price sorcerer. Pay it, or die."

The wind and wolves howled through the trees. Behind Vainamoinen, the skulls chattered incessantly, their eyes aglow.

Vainamoinen trembled with rage, his sword point quivered. But he had learned his lesson, pushed his rage, his pride, aside. For Aino. This time.

"Very well, Crone," he said, the stinging wind tugging at his heavy cloak, pulling at his full, grey beard. "I agree to your price. A song, for the Water." Slowly, Vainamoinen lowered his sword. He took a step toward his *kantele*, lying on the frozen ground.

"Ach," said the witch, "you'll not need that to sing."

Vainamoinen turned. "As you wish."

Then he began to sing. Under the stars and the uncaring moon, over the driving wind and the whipping snow, Vainamoinen the Wise, hero of his people, sang of his shame. His words shaped a sadness in the night, a soul-wrenching grief. They carried far and high, deep into the heart of shadow and beyond. The words were a catharsis, a cleansing, offered to the night openly. They were a gift, bestowed by a tormented heart upon the shadows that mocked him.

When he was through, when his song was ended, the shadows were silent.

Baba Jaga stared at him. "It was well done, old man," she said.

Vainamoinen looked up to meet her gaze. "It is not yet done."

And one more time, Vainamoinen raised his perfect voice. The words were different this time, the cadence altered. Of origins did he sing, of beginnings, of the birth of earth and stone. Before the wizard's words, Baba Jaga reeled. In her hand her pestle, so ancient and strong, split wide down the center before changing into dust that was carried away by a startled, frenzied wind. Baba Jaga cried out, sought a spell that would destroy the wizard where he stood.

Was too late. Below her waist, her mortar cracked with the sound of the world breaking. The witch screamed, the terrible, nightmare sound echoed by fence and hut. An instant later the stone of the mortar, hewn from the rock of Golgotha so very far away, shattered into scree. And Baba Jaga Kostianaya Noga, the Dancer on the Gravestones, tumbled from her lofty height to land upon the frozen ground like a broken thing.

As the witch fell, the fence of bones collapsed, reduced to a heap of ivory, then to dust and at last, to nothing at all. Beyond the fence the single leg that held the hut began to wither. With a sharp crack, the leg snapped, the hut's weight too great. With a terrific crash, the baneful shack settled, for the first time, upon the cold earth.

Casting his hooded gaze about the clearing, the silence as thick as the muffling snow, Vainamoinen quietly approached his *kantele*.

"Shall I sing for you as well, precious kitten?"

The black cat, hackles raised, claws extended, met the steely eyes of the sorcerer, then bolted into the shadows. Stooping to recover his instrument, Vainamoinen turned to the witch. She lay upon the cold ground, arms twisted and bent, unable to rise. Her legs, he saw, were gnarled and knobbed. Tufts of flesh clung to them in places, but he knew those diseased limbs could never support even her spindly form. They were the reason for the mortar. As he approached her still form, Vainamoinen felt no pity, no shame at his deed. For centuries, Baba Jaga had gorged herself on the life's blood of the innocent, had devoured the souls of the pure. And now, at last, she had been made to answer for her crimes.

As Vainamoinen drew near, Baba Jaga shifted her head, peered at him through rheumy eyes.

"I shall take my Water now, Crone," Vainamoinen said, "and leave you with my song. Sing it through the long nights, let the shadows rejoice in its telling. But know this: I'll not flee the darkness, ever. Even if that darkness is my own."

Vainamoinen watched the witch mutter silent words. Then, from out of the night, the swans came. Gracefully, they swept down, and with the very last of her strength, Baba Jaga Kostianaya Noga clung to their sable necks. As one then, the swans took to the air. For a moment they hovered in the clearing.

"Foo, I'll remember, wizard," she said before her cackle split the darkness. "The Water is yours. A bargain struck is a bargain kept. And know, foo, that I will sing your song, for as long as light casts shadow. We will meet again, Vainamoinen Kaleva, foo, foo! I shall wait for you in the night."

And carried by her swans, cackling through the sky, Baba Jaga rose, higher, higher.

"The pool, Crone," Vainamoinen cried, "where is the pool?"

From out of the darkness Baba Jaga cried, "It is in the hut, of course, foolish man." And Baba Jaga, her fell laughter ringing through the night, was gone.

"No. No!" Panicked, Vainamoinen stumbled -- ran for the teetering hut. Hurtling across the threshold where the bone fence once stood, Vainamoinen reached the door. Creaking, dangling, held in place by a single hinge, Vainamoinen gripped the iron handle and pulled. The door came free in his grasp. Casting it aside, the wizard stepped inside. Frantically, he cast his gaze about. Inside, a small table still stood, across from a huge, cold brick oven. A putrid stench permeated the wood of the hut. Broken jars and smashed vials littered the cracked and rotted floor. Everywhere collapsed shelves and cupboards lay, strewn in broken piles.

"What have I done?" Vainamoinen said. Feverishly, the great sorcerer scanned the wreckage called down by his song. Then he saw it, at the very back of the small, crumbling shack: a round basin. "No," he cried, spying the thin crack that ran from the basin's lip to the floor. In his haste to reach the pool, Vainamoinen stumbled. Pain shot up his arm from his hand. A broken bottle on the floor, blood welling from a terrible wound. Ignoring the pain, on hands and knees, the wizard crawled. As he drew nearer, he saw the precious Water pooling on the floor beneath the stony vessel, seeping through the crack, blood from a wound far more terrible than his own.

"Please," Vainamoinen pleaded to the unheeding night, "not like this, not like this."

Vainamoinen rose, looked in the basin.

His heart threatened to burst with relief.

"Ah." Reaching beneath his cloak, his aged hands trembling, he pulled free a small, glass vial. He dipped the translucent spout into the water and filled it slowly, taking care not to spill any more of the precious liquid pooled at the bottom of the basin. Capping the flask, placing it deep inside his robe, well away from his own water, he stood.

Life forbidden, where Death and Entropy are all.

"I am coming, Aino," he whispered. "At last, I am coming."

* * *

Gathering his *kantele*, Vainamoinen plucked at the strings. A moment later, Tursas thundered out of the woods.

Trembling, the mighty beast of war shied from the wizard's gentle touch.

"Oh, my great, great friend. Come to me."

Reluctantly, shamefully, Tursas lowered his frothing head. Vainamoinen hugged the huge horse, held it until its fear was past. "She was a terrible foe, Tursas. But she has gone now, and we've still work left unfinished. Shall we ride together, you and I, one more time into legend?"

Tursas reared tall, his answer ringing through the forest.

Vainamoinen laughed. With more difficulty than he would have liked, his arm and leg still aching from his fall, Vainamoinen climbed atop Tursas's back. "Come my friend, outside Juskazero we shall find what we need." Carefully, Vainamoinen reached one hand into a deep pocket inside his cloak. Withdrawing the sprig of withe, he nodded.

Then a jerk of the reins and Vainamoinen and Tursas were off. To find a dead man who would lead them into the Land of Eternal Shadow.

While in silence, from the darkness, the wolf watched all.

* * *

“Yaaah!”

The sound of the cart bursting forward as the horse bolted drowned out the taut snap of the rope.

When the horse came to rest, the hanged man’s gurgled cries were still prominent among the silence. Twitching, convulsing, arms wrenching to be free of the cord that secured them behind his back, the dying man dangled from the broad branch of the long-dead birch, his body silhouetted against the setting sun.

Vainamoinen could see the man’s ragged breath in the chill air, could see the goose flesh crawl along his naked body. The man’s eyes bulged in death the way they never could have in life, the blood from the visceral brand on his forehead – the murderer’s mark – pooled in them, fell from his quavering lip to the icy ground below.

Vainamoinen listened as a cheer went up from the dozen or so witnesses when the man at last died.

A moment later the twitching stopped.

From the shadows of the forest, Vainamoinen sighed. “Now,” he said to Tursas, “we wait.”

They did not wait long. It was nearing twilight and Vainamoinen knew that even a crowd of armed men would tempt fate only so long. To those who listened to such things, twilight was said to be an in-between time, indefinable and fey. Some said that at twilight the dead walked the woods; that the warriors of the Tuatha were free to roam.

Vainamoinen knew this to be true.

When the last of the men had disappeared from sight, Tursas carried Vainamoinen into the small clearing. For more than a hundred years, Vainamoinen knew, men had died here. Some, as the murderer dangling in the wind before him, deservedly so.

But not every man hanged was so deserving. The clearing was an angry place, where for decades unjust and cowardly acts were perpetrated against good and fair men. It was a place one could only see truthfully from the corner of an eye, where a shadow was not always a shadow, a whisper not always the wind.

And so as he entered the haunted clearing, Vainamoinen quietly sang. He sang of sorrow, deep and profound, for those good men whom humanity and fate had wronged. His was a song of hope lost, and love, of regret and bitterest grief. Over the keening wind that might not have been wind, his radiant, quiet words carried across the clearing and the night, across the distance that separated stars and worlds, that those so wronged in life might know there was one who was sorry.

And on that night, it was enough.

Still singing his quiet song, Vainamoinen, atop Tursas, reached the hanged man. The wizard sensed the ghosts of the place, felt their spirit eyes and knew they would suffer him, this time.

“Thank you,” he whispered to the wind. Then he stared up at the dead man hanging from the dead branch above him.

Vainamoinen reached into his cloak, withdrew the sprig of withe. As he did so, one more time he began to sing. The night resonated with the force of his words, their power as deep and old as the earth. All around him the ground began to tremble – nature and the world struggling as one to preserve an ancient, forbidden secret.

Yet still did Vainamoinen sing, the cadence harsh, dissonant, the words guttural and rife with unfettered might. Above the wizard, the dead man began to twitch. Singing still, Vainamoinen reached up, tied the cord-like withe to the dead man's icy toe. Everywhere the wind swirled and raged, tore at the snow and ice that covered the forest floor.

Then, just as the sun set, just as the last of its red-orange rays dwindled into darkness, Vainamoinen stopped.

And the dead man stared down at him through open, hollowed eyes. Calm fell upon the clearing, a resigned silence, as the twisting shade waited.

"Show me the path to Tuonela," Vainamoinen commanded the swaying lich.

The dead man blinked albino eyes, crusted blood cracking, flaking.

Vainamoinen could feel the dead man's hatred, could feel him fighting his doom.

"By my words and my deeds are you bound," Vainamoinen cried, rising in his stirrups, holding that wicked gaze. "I command you – show me Tuonela!"

The dead man's cry was harrowing, ripped from some deep, unholy place. When it was finished, when the last of its terrible echo was faded, the murderer turned his head, pulled his dead gaze from the wizard.

Vainamoinen sighed and followed that gaze. Across the clearing a path, winding and stark, stood revealed through the skeletal trees.

Vainamoinen stared up at the dead man. "Thank you," he said.

A single red tear trickled down the murderer's cracked cheek.

As Vainamoinen reached up, he sang once more, the soft words simple and kind, an easing out of the world. Above him the shade closed its bleached eyes a final time. Gently, singing still, quietly, Vainamoinen untied the withe from the dead man's toe and fell silent.

Then, amid the quiet of the clearing, the wizard cut the murderer down from the tree and buried him as best he might.

When he was through, he once again mounted Tursas's broad back.

And horse and wizard followed a forbidden path to the Land of the Dead.

* * *

The path to the river was long, winding its way first through snowy thickets, then through thicker woods and finally through deep, deep forest where the snow had all but vanished.

Vainamoinen had been this way once, long ago. A fool's quest for words had brought him to the river where Tuoni's daughters met him. For the price of a song they had carried him across to Tuonela, the Land of the Dead.

Where Tuonetar, the terrible queen of the Damned, received him.

'And for what do you need these precious words?' Tuonetar had asked from the height of her black iron throne.

'For a song,' he had answered, terrified, *'I need them to fashion a song.'*

He would never forget her laughter.

'Foolish child, can it be that you have traveled all this way to seek out words of creation?'

'Yes,' he had answered, more the fool, *'words to create a song, a bright song, of water and wind, that I might give life to the greatest ship of all.'*

More laughter, loud and long. *'Foolish sage, know you not? Creation is anathema to this place, life forbidden, where Death and Entropy are all. Your quest was doomed before you arrived. And now, so are you.'*

Had it not been for Tuoni's crooked-fingered son, Surma, who so foolishly plucked at his *kantele* and died, Vainamoinen knew well that the Queen's words would likely have been true. Free of Surma's watch, Vainamoinen escaped Death's Palace and reached the water's edge. There, in sheerest desperation, he had changed his form into an otter, his *kantele* becoming the slick fur on his back, and braved the malignant waters.

He had almost died that day. Lying on the shores of that horrible river, he had thought he would die, wished, almost, for the release that death would offer. But he had lived, lived to grow wise and strong, lived to return to the place where only he, of all those who had gone before, had ever returned from.

Such is wisdom.

* * *

As before, the daughters of Tuoni waited for him at the water's edge. This time Kiputyttö and Loviatar.

Thin and bent, Kiputyttö, the Diseased, whose every breath released a hundred plagues, was a wretched, misshapen thing. Her left arm ended at her elbow where a tiny, gnarled hand worked hard to open and close. Her right arm, long and thin, ended in a huge, swollen hand with six thumbs, the thick, callused knuckles of which dragged in the mud. Her face was hidden behind seaweed hair that hung down to her emaciated breasts.

At her side was Loviatar, Mother Pain and Origin of a Thousand Scourges, the most despicable of Tuoni's daughters and, some said, the source of all evil.

She was also the most beautiful creature Vainamoinen had ever seen. Knowing better than to look at her, her beauty the insatiable beauty of all that is forbidden, Vainamoinen turned.

Loviatar laughed. "Am I so ugly, sorcerer?"

Beside her, Kiputyttö's laughter was harsh. "We have been waiting for you wizard," said the diseased hag, her voice a rusty sword drawn from a metal sheath. "Mother and father knew you would come. Eventually."

"Indeed," said Vainamoinen, stepping down from Tursas's broad back. "Wait here, my friend," he whispered. "If I am able, I will return to this bank. For now, rest easy. Your work is done." Stroking the great horse's head, the mightiest wizard in the world secured his *kantele* upon his back and turned to the sister goddesses. "I am ready," he said.

"It shall make a fine trophy, that harp." With that, Loviatar turned to face the river. Slowly, she raised her hand.

A moment later the surface of the water was shattered by the vast, enormous bulk of the One-With-No-Name. Young yet, said to be the unholy offspring of Loviatar and Water, the Nameless was the secret guardian of the river. Huge, black waves crashed over the creature's enormous back, preventing Vainamoinen from seeing the monster whole.

"We, too, have grown wise, wizard," the Temptress said. "An otter, indeed."

Over the mocking din of Loviatar's laughter, the Nameless cast its monstrous, mottled tail onto the shore and the wicked sisters stepped across, onto its vast, barge-like back.

"Come, sage," said Loviatar. "Your ride awaits."

Like a prisoner resigned to the gallows, Vainamoinen joined the terrible sisters. Fate or Doom commanded he do no less.

* * *

Once across the river, free of the whims of the Nameless, Vainamoinen followed his guides along a path of bones through a forest of dead trees, the only sound in the whole of the world, the constant crunch-crack of bone beneath booted heel. No breeze stirred the cool air; no sound at all disturbed the world.

This it was, Vainamoinen knew, this silence, this appalling absence, that set Tuonela apart from other worlds. Oppressive, tyrannical, it was an invisible anvil on which his sanity was to be broken. Above, in the forever-twilit sky, not a single cloud drifted, no star gazed down on them, no uncaring moon. Just vast, merciless emptiness.

They walked for some time, through muted twilight and maddening stillness, Vainamoinen concentrating on the sounds of breaking bone.

Then all at once he saw it, the vast walls looming out of the dead woods like an ocean, like a world of shadow. Black, windowless iron, brutal, unyielding.

Citadel of a God.

Vainamoinen had thought himself steeled. Over and over again in his long life he had faced and conquered despair, time after time had chased away the icy touch of fear. He was named Mightiest Wizard in the World, Hero of Light, and in his heart he knew these things to be true.

He had even escaped, once, from this place. But for all these things he was human still, mortal. And this, this was so much more. Decades had muted his memory, had made things less than they had been. Staring upwards now at the jet towers that raked the sky, Vainamoinen marveled at the whim of chance that had allowed him his freedom, wondered at the magnificent pride that had led him to believe he might wander this land with impunity.

Led him to believe he could do so again.

“Can you have forgotten?” Mother Pain asked from behind. Laughing, Loviatar led him through the clearing, through the vast, impregnable gates of the tower, and on, into the very heart of Death.

* * *

“And so, at last, you have come back to me, my little wizard.”

Tuonetar, Black Queen of Death, rose from her throne of iron, her words carrying easily, effortlessly over the gurgling stream of water that passed through the chamber to the left of the dais. This too, Vainamoinen remembered, a tributary of the river. From the raised platform, the Queen stared down at him.

Tall, regal, very, very beautiful, Tuonetar was every bit the Queen. Her robe of diaphanous green matched exactly her verdant gaze. Upon her brow she wore a tiara of woven rose stems, the drawn, thorned stems long browned and dead. Her sable hair cascaded down her back in billows, brushing the cold iron floor of the dais. At her rising the throng of assembled damned, come to bear witness to the wizard’s return, fell to their collective knees.

Vainamoinen remained standing.

Tuonetar smiled.

Then Tuoni rose. The Lord of Death was tall, lean, and very pale. His own black hair fell past his waist. His thin, aquiline features were striking, his black, pupil-less eyes seeming

to take in things that were beyond other men. Or Gods. Laying a pale, slender hand upon the shoulder of his wife, the God of the Dead said, "My wife has missed you, sage." His sonorous words reverberated off the pitiless walls of the tower. "She had such plans for you."

Before the Gods, Vainamoinen remained unbowed.

"I have not come to play at words with you, great Lord," said Vainamoinen, his own voice strong. "I have come to ask a boon."

Tuonetar's brow rose in surprise. "Can it be? Can you possibly be so foolish?"

Around him the dead murmured, a hollow, vacant sound. Vainamoinen turned to them, those who had come to see his shame, to watch, as he was broken. They looked like live men whose color and spirit had been drained. Ashen, bent, hideous wounds unhealed, they stared at him through lifeless eyes. Vainamoinen could sense their longing, their longing for life. Turning from them, pushing aside their despair, he faced Tuoni. "There is one here who should not be here," he began. "Slain by my cowardice, she was taken too soon. I would have her back."

Tuoni stepped forward. "Interesting. And what do you offer, in exchange for this wronged soul?"

Vainamoinen drew a breath. "I offer myself."

The dead around him gasped, empty eyes wide.

"SILENCE!" Tuoni roared. And silence fell. "A worthy prize. But you know such a deal is forbidden. Life is not mine to give."

"I do know," Vainamoinen said, reaching into the deep pocket of his robe. "It is why I brought this."

Tuoni's gaze narrowed as he stared at the small, translucent flask.

"The Water of Life," Vainamoinen cried, holding the flask high for all to see. "Brought into the Land of Death that Aino might live again, in exchange for my own soul."

Around him the dead rose like a tide, groaned and flowed toward him. "Life," one of them said, then another, and another. Slowly, hands began to grab at him, at his robe, his hair.

"Enough!" said Tuoni. "Away from him – now!"

Slowly the surging wave of dead fell back. When they were kneeling once again, Tuoni said, "It is an interesting offer wizard. But I am afraid you are too late."

Vainamoinen stared at the Death God. "I . . . don't understand," he began, confused, and for the first time, afraid. "How could I be –"

"We have already had a *better* offer." Tuoni turned then, smiling. From behind his massive throne, in the company of the largest wolf he had ever seen - no, he had seen this wolf once before, standing over its dead mate - Aino strode forward.

And she too, was smiling.

Vainamoinen staggered, reached out a trembling, disbelieving hand. "Aino?"

Tuonetar laughed, then the Black Queen crossed the dais, gently brushed Aino's blonde hair with a sinuous movement of her hand. Standing behind her, both hands on Aino's shoulders, Tuonetar stared at Vainamoinen. "Is this the reason you came?" she taunted, and beside her the wolf rumbled, a deep, terrifying sound that seemed to make the walls of the tower shudder. More frightening still was the expression on Aino's face. She smiled still, a poisonous, hateful smile. Even from across the chamber, Vainamoinen could feel her loathing. It reached for him, sought his open heart.

And why should she not hate him? What had he expected? Was she to be thankful that he came for her?

He had driven her from her love and killed her.

Did you never once think of the girl? The witch's words. True when she had spoken them. True now. Was there no end to his foolishness?

"I still don't understand," Vainamoinen said, turning from the grinning Aino, his voice harsh.

"No?" said Tuonetar. "I thought you wise." More laughter.

Appropriate, Vainamoinen thought. Such was the job of a Fool.

"But then, how could you know. Louhi, explain to the wizard."

And everything came clear.

At the feet of the Black Queen, the monstrous wolf shimmered, its fur shifting, blurring, until the wolf was gone.

And Louhi, Dark Lady of the North and Mistress of Pohjola, stood revealed. Then it was her turn to laugh.

"Oh, Vainamoinen," Louhi said through the laughter, "can you, truly, have been such a fool?"

Anger began to burn, hot, uncontrolled, deep inside the wizard's heart. "It was you who led me to the witch," Vainamoinen said, his words quiet, dangerous, understanding coming at last. "Were you so confident that I would succeed? Had she slain me, what would you have done? There are other lands that might lay claim to a soul."

Louhi's smile faltered.

"Ah, I see. You didn't know. Baba Jaga was a more formidable opponent than you surmised. Fortune smiled on you, Louhi, for she might well have slain me, and all your plans have gone for naught. But she did not, and I found the Water and came."

Vainamoinen shook his head, turned to Aino. "Ah, Aino, beautiful, wronged Aino. Has she promised you freedom, has she promised you life?"

"Both," Aino spat. "She promised me the life you drove me from. Coward! Now you will rot in this place, as I would have, and I shall return to love and the world."

For innocence lost, and shame, Vainamoinen wept. "Oh, my dear. You are a pawn. Louhi cares nothing for you. She has used you to lure me here." Vainamoinen shook his head. "Without the Water, Aino, the dead are forbidden life. She has lied to you. It is what she does."

For the first time since her appearance on the dais, the baneful, icy smile that polluted Aino's otherwise pristine face, faltered. She turned, grey eyes wide, uncertain, to the Sorceress of the North.

"And Louhi," Vainamoinen said, his words chilling, "what is your reward? For luring me here, for your lies, what payment is enough?"

Louhi met Aino's bewildered gaze, stroked the dead woman's hair. "Vengeance, Vainamoinen. Vengeance is my reward." The sorceress cried, "The Sampo was mine! Its never-ending magic would have made me the most powerful mage in the world! But you took it from me, stole it, a thief in the night, and destroyed it. Did you think I would forget? Did you think I would *ever* forget?" Louhi shook her head. "And so, it has come to this. My precious Aino, I offered you a chance at freedom. Now I give you that chance."

The merest gesture, a spoken word, and Aino was no more. And upon the unforgiving iron of the dais, a great pike thrashed, gills suppurating, fins screaming for purchase.

"No!" Vainamoinen cried, throwing himself toward the dais.

"Hold him!" Tuonetar commanded, and the dead obeyed.

Vainamoinen struggled beneath the cold hands that held him fast, knew they were too many, sought for calm. Began to chant.

“His mouth!” Louhi screamed, pointing. “Seal his mouth, quickly!”

At the sorceress’ words fingers long dead laced themselves across his face, tangled themselves in his long beard and sealed his mouth.

Silence then, but for the struggles of a dying fish. Louhi stared down at the suffering, terrified creature. Then gently, like a mother, Louhi stooped and lifted the pike, held its suffocating form before her and all those in the chamber. “Your chance, beautiful, pitiful Aino,” Louhi said, mock sadness in her voice. “Just cross the river. On the other side you shall once again find the world of the living. I wish you luck in your travels.”

Understanding coming too late – always too late! – Vainamoinen fought again for freedom, struggled furiously, mightily, with a hero’s pride. But deprived of his greatest weapon, held fast by the damned, his struggles, for all their nobility, were doomed to failure. And he was forced to watch as the Dark Lady of the North walked over to the edge of the gurgling stream and released Aino into the black waters, where she had her chance at freedom.

“Farewell, gentle Aino,” Louhi said.

“Farewell, fish,” said Loviatar quietly. Then she stared at Vainamoinen and smiled. “Give our regards to my son, when you see him.”

Vainamoinen’s eyes fell, and as Aino disappeared amid the deadly waters, his valiant struggles ended.

Tuoni turned to Louhi. “Our deal is done, sorceress,” he said, “and Tuonela is no place for the living. Even you.”

Louhi bowed low to the King of the Damned. “Your will, great lord.” Then she turned to Vainamoinen. “And to you, my great and implacable foe, I bid a final farewell, for we shall not meet again.”

At her words Vainamoinen’s head rose, and he felt something like fire burn behind his eyes.

For a moment, amid the shadows of the dead, the Dark Lady of the North knew fear. Quickly, Louhi nodded to the God who nodded in turn and, with a single step toward the rushing water, Louhi was gone.

And Vainamoinen was the last.

“Release him,” Tuonetar said. “Even your mother’s words will not be enough, not here, in this place which is ours.”

Vainamoinen knew the Goddess spoke true. He could not fight a God.

He hoped he would not have to. “So, your vengeance has come, Tuonetar,” Vainamoinen said. “Through the trickery of a mortal you have claimed me for your own. I wonder, though,” he said, reaching inside his robe, “shall you keep me this time?” With that, Vainamoinen drew free the Water of Life. In one fluid motion he unstoppered the vial and poured a tiny amount of the precious liquid into his aged hand. Turning to the nearest of the dead, he cast the Water, baptizing the lich with Life.

Stunned silence reigned in the chamber, all eyes focused on the damned soul who staggered back, as if struck, only to stand, after a moment, frozen and dumb. The pitiable creature stared at Vainamoinen, hope manifest in its dead gaze.

Then a miracle. All at once color returned to the soul’s grey skin, life to its dead eyes. In silence, they watched a sort of rapturous peace descend upon the dead man.

“Thank you,” he whispered, an instant before he collapsed into dust; free at last.

Holding the bottle high amid the silence, Vainamoinen stared at the shocked Goddess. “Who shall be next?”

The dead surged forward as one, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. For an instant Vainamoinen was lost to sight beneath the deluge. Then, in a voice that had shaken mountains he cried, "Look, here! Here is your Water! Take it if you would!" And Vainamoinen, amid the ocean of damned souls, tossed the stoppered bottle on the dais, where the God and Goddess stood.

The legions of the dead surged forward, a desiccated, rotting tide that flooded the raised platform.

Before he turned and fled, her voice rising even as Vainamoinen's form began to shift and flow, the ancient wizard heard Tuonetar scream, "Back, get back! How dare —"

Her last words were cut short by the moaning cries of the dead.

In the form of a wolf, Vainamoinen flew from the iron tower and out into the waiting darkness. Over the din of battle Vainamoinen heard the God's voice. "You'll not escape me wizard! Not again!"

In front of Vainamoinen, the shadow-woods changed. Where a moment before there had been one path, now there were dozens. Where trees had been, thorns now stood in their place. But worse, by far, than all of that, than the world changing to challenge and trap him, was the moon that rose from beyond the edge of the wood. It burned in the empty sky, a desecration of the void. Baleful green, it hovered like an opaline eye, and Vainamoinen knew that he could not run fast enough, far enough, to escape its odious gaze.

Then from behind him a shape emerged out of the roiling chaos of the tower, a huge shape, vast and jet, lumbering towards him.

Vainamoinen turned, lupine fangs bared.

"You are, indeed, your mother's son. But you'll not need those fangs, not yet." As the creature drew close, Vainamoinen saw the dead wolf from the forest. The arrow that pierced its neck was livid and stark under the cancerous light of the moon.

"Who —"

"I am Naaki, messenger of great Ilmatar."

"Mother?" Vainamoinen said. "You were sent by my mother?"

"Yes, in an effort to warn you of Louhi's treachery and of the Death God's desires. But on my way to warn you, Louhi treacherously slew me, and my message was lost."

A rumbling shook the land then, deep. Something old finding release.

"With the rising of the moon," Naaki said, "Kalma shall again walk the land. We've little time. Though I failed you once, I'll not do so now. Change back, quickly, and climb on my back. Even in your wolf form your speed is no match for mine. I'll get you to the river. This I swear."

Somewhere in the baleful night, the world broke. In the distance Vainamoinen heard Tuoni cry, "Find him, Kalma. Find him and bring him to me!" The answering roar was terrible to hear.

And Vainamoinen knew, that for the first time in a star's age, Kalma, Soul Scourge and Life Grinder, was free.

With a word, Vainamoinen changed once more and climbed aboard the broad back of Naaki. "Can we outrun him?"

"We can try," Naaki answered. "We can try."

* * *

The Soul Scourge surged through the night unfettered, and the Land of the Dead trembled

at its passing. Had any being seen the beast, they might have described it as a huge, endlessly black lion; eyes gangrenous; mane wispy, serpentine shadow. But no soul, living or dead, had ever, in all the long, long history of the Universe, met Kalma and survived. The consummate hunter, the nature of Kalma had been the subject of long debates among mortals and immortals alike. Some claimed Kalma was the daughter of Tuoni and the Night, a forbidden union that resulted in the darkest creature of all. Others say that Kalma existed before Tuoni's rise, and only suffered Tuoni's claim to Tuonela knowing that the day would come when it would be released from its infernal prison. And murder the Universe. Others did not dare believe Kalma existed at all. After all, if the Gods themselves did not know the nature of the beast, who could?

In the end, the origins of the beast mattered little enough. For Kalma was free now, and Vainamoinen was its prey.

* * *

A harrowing plunge through emerald darkness brought them at last to the forest's end. Beyond the final clearing, surging black-green billows roaring like a gale was the river. Behind them, Vainamoinen could hear Kalma's inexorable approach.

The Life Grinder free. Vainamoinen could not long think on that, on its meaning. He still had to cross the river.

Without a word, Naaki thundered forward to the edge of the world.

"VAINAMOINEN!"

Over the roaring river on whose shore they stopped, over the thundering approach of Kalma Soul Scourge, over the anger and outrage of the forest they had escaped, Vainamoinen heard Tuoni's maddened cry. It split the green-black night like a bolt of emerald lightning and echoed through the infinite void above.

Naaki turned from the river, looked up and back at the wizard who sat astride his broad shoulders.

Vainamoinen reached into his robe. "The Water," he said, pulling forth a small glass vial, a self-deprecating smile playing at the edges of his mouth. "It was not the *real* Water."

Beneath him, the huge wolf shook its head.

Vainamoinen shrugged. "It took them longer to determine than I would have thought."

"A clever ploy."

A small laugh. "Perhaps. Though for naught if we fail to cross the river."

Behind them, distant thunder, an approaching storm, Kalma drew closer, always closer. Among the rolling swells of the river Vainamoinen could see a monstrous shape, mottled and looming: waiting. "I fear my previous method of escape would prove . . . less than effective this time."

"Indeed," answered the dead wolf. "But the Nameless can only reach you if you are *in* the water."

Puzzled, Vainamoinen said, "Yes, but there is no way to by-pass the river without Tuoni's blessing. We must cross over it, or through it. It is the only way."

"No," said Naaki, "there is another way. The answer is in your hand."

"The Water of Life? How –"

"How matters little. It is enough to know that before us courses the river of Death. In your hands, you hold the Water of Life. Pour the Water, Vainamoinen, empty it into river. Then I shall speak words, and you shall sing them. Sing them Vainamoinen, as you have never sung

words before.”

Naaki carried Vainamoinen to the very edge of the rocky shore, where he unstopped the vial and poured its contents into the black river. As the Water of Life tumbled forth to mix with the river of Death, Naaki whispered and Vainamoinen sang.

It was a song unlike any Vainamoinen had ever sung. A song unlike any sung, by anyone, ever. It was a celebration of Life amid Death, sublime, majestic, a song that contained secrets of the kind unknown to mortal man. Profound, immeasurably powerful, Vainamoinen sang the words of a God. For he knew, more than he had known anything in his life, that these were his mother’s own words, his mother, whose aid was forbidden but allowed because Tuoni and Louhi, God and mortal, had made a deal. As he sang, tears of joy welled in his eyes, streamed down his weathered, haggard face. Never in all his life had he sung such words, unleashed such power. He reveled in the might, took pride in the song that was an unfettering of his bright, bright soul.

And at the edge of the world, under the brutal, baneful light of an emerald moon, with the thunderous, incessant approach of the Soul Scourge drawing ever closer, Vainamoinen, with his soul’s release, parted the river of Death.

When his song was ended, Vainamoinen stared at the passage through the river fashioned by his words, held secure by a power he could not fathom.

“Mother . . .” Vainamoinen whispered.

Then behind them, Kalma exploded from the woods.

For a moment, Naaki stared at the leonine creature with its mane of shadow, took its measure. Knew they were lost.

“Go!” Vainamoinen cried. “Go!”

With a primal, bestial roar, Naaki’s ancient muscles rippled and he surged forward between the towering walls of water and along the path that Life had fashioned.

Kalma followed, over the clearing, to the river’s edge.

From Naaki’s back, Vainamoinen turned. “He waits,” he said, “at the edge. Uncertain. I think he shall not –”

Then Kalma too, braved the path of Life, the distance between them closing, closing.

Beneath him, Naaki stopped, said, “Here is where we must part.”

Behind them, Kalma roared.

Vainamoinen stared at the wolf. “But we are so close. Once across, you will live again. We can –”

“No,” said Naaki, “we cannot.”

And Vainamoinen knew the wolf spoke truth.

“Shift your form and run. If I am able, I shall hold the beast long enough for you to cross. But you must go. Now.”

“I don’t understand,” Vainamoinen said, his heart breaking, “who am I that you would do this thing for me?”

“You are your mother’s son, whom I was sent to ward. And because, once, when I was slain, you sang for me, at the end. Now go.”

For a moment only, Vainamoinen held the beast’s gaze. Then a word and Vainamoinen was gone, the form of the aged wizard replaced with that of a great, grey wolf.

“Good,” said Naaki. Then Naaki whispered a final word in the wizard’s lupine ear and Vainamoinen fled, surged through the impossible passage; strove for Life.

While Naaki turned, teeth bared.

The Soul Scourge approached like a storm, like a primal force of the world. At its passing

the walls of water rippled and shook, the floor of the river trembled. Kalma stopped before the wolf, towered over him, looming like the fall of night.

Ahead, as he ran, Vainamoinen became the first living being to hear the voice of the Soul Scourge.

"You cannot stop me, little god," the great lion said. "You could not even stay alive! Step aside. My battle is not with you, it is not your soul I seek this day."

"No," said Naaki. "I'll not stand aside. Though you are more than me, though your might runs deeper, still shall I fight. For Life."

A growl, soul-shuddering in its fierceness, answered the wolf's challenge. "You've courage godling, but it shall never be enough."

"We shall see."

And so it came to pass, amid the towering walls of water, upon the floor of the river of Death, that wolf met lion in a battle for Life.

* * *

The sounds were terrifying. Far ahead of the battle, Vainamoinen ran. But as fast as he ran, as far, he could not escape them. He was close now, so close to the shore. To Life. Surely it would be all right to look, surely it was safe.

So he turned then, at the last, and bore witness to the battle.

Across from him, on the far shore of Tuonela, Tuoni and Tuonetar also watched. Behind them, a rotting sea, the legions of the damned were arrayed, spread out as far as eyes could see. They would not brave that path, Vainamoinen knew, forged as it was by the powers of Life, but still had they come; to bear witness to the battle being played out on the borders of Life and Death.

He had heard the tales of the enigma that was Kalma, knew that no being, ever, had withstood it. In the back of his mind he knew that Naaki too, would fall. Had to fall. No being, *ever*. And still, knowing that and more, Vainamoinen was not prepared for what he saw.

The wolf was torn, not a piece of fur on his immense body remained unscarred. Blood, black in the green light, matted its thick fur, flew from its ragged, shredded body. Even Louhi's murderous arrow was broken. Naaki limped badly, the beast's right front foot smashed and useless. Slowly, painfully, the wolf circled the lion, head low, neck hidden.

The lion that was so very much more than a lion, was more even than the Gods knew. But even with what it was, with all its deep, deep power, the lion was not unscathed. In its massive flanks white scars were torn, gaping wounds that would have surely slain a lesser creature. Great gaps in its shadow-mane let through the emerald light of the moon. And it, too, circled, slowly, wearily.

It charged again, merciless, pitiless as time.

Vainamoinen's heart broke and tears sprang to his wolf-grey eyes as he watched noble Naaki continue to fight, eluding, darting, attacking where he could, summoning an endless courage that was torturous to behold, so gallant was it and so doomed.

Again the lion backed away, a fresh scar, livid in the moon's unnatural light, across the side of his neck and face. Well struck, that blow, driving the lion back.

Giving Naaki time, time to look at Vainamoinen. "Go," the wolf said, then the lion too, turned. "Go, now. Let this not have been in vain!"

For one endless moment, Vainamoinen met the wolf's gaze. "I shall never forget," said the

wizard. "I shall never let the world forget."

It was too much, the pain, Vainamoinen could see it in the eyes of his friend. The wolf could not answer, could only watch as Vainamoinen, with a final glance at Tuoni on the far side, flew for the shore, where Life was waiting.

Behind him, Vainamoinen heard the lion roar, heard the crash – the terrible, world-shaking crash – as Kalma and Naaki met for the final time.

Heard the snap, the triumphant cry of the dead. Knew that it had come too late, that Naaki had succeeded, had won for Life. Surging up the river's edge, hatred unlike anything he had ever known in his heart, Vainamoinen reached the shore. With a word, he was a man, once more Vainamoinen the Mighty, Wizard of the North. He turned slowly, for he could hear the lion, could hear the urging, pleading cries of the dead. He was smiling as the lion came for him, not so fast this time, not so strong. Naaki had given account, had fought, so very bravely, a battle that would live in legend for eternity.

But this battle was his to finish. With Naaki's help. And his mother's.

Thus it came to pass, that upon the shores of Life, Vainamoinen sang Naaki's final words.

And brought the river down. The water fell like a mountain into the void, crashed and roared and swallowed Kalma whole. For a moment, Vainamoinen saw the Nameless rear its frenzied head. He had denied the beast, Vainamoinen knew, cheated it, broke and separated its world.

"There is an invader still, in your water," Vainamoinen whispered. "Find him."

Then the Nameless dove, broke the waters that were his own and was lost. Kalma and the Nameless lost forever.

For a long time Vainamoinen stood at the edge of the world, watching the Gods retreat into darkness, staring out at the black waters that separated Life from Death. He thought of Aino and of Louhi, of Naaki and his mother. So much lost, gained, so very many layers of grief. He had come seeking redemption, a light in his darkness. He had found scorn, treachery, and nobility that would endure for eternity.

The wisest man in the world was at least wise enough to know, that for now, it was enough.

From behind him Tursas nickered. Vainamoinen turned, stroked the horse's head gently. "Ah. My friend. Take me home."

And humming, composing, quietly searching for words, the Wizard of the North climbed atop the back of his friend, and Tursas took him safely home.

The End

Scott Clements lives in Windsor, ON Canada. He currently works as an elementary school teacher, while trying to finish his novel SEAMUND. His previous novel, a children's fantasy entitled THE THERMOPYLUNG, is in the hands of super-agent Robert Stephenson, who is currently searching out a home for it. He has had several short stories published, all in for-the-love magazines. His story Into Pohjola introduced Vainamoinen in the October 2003 issue of Deep Magic.

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a dog with him, holding the thing at bay.

George tugged on his boots and said, "Come." Grabbing the keys to the kennel, he ran down the stairs yelling, "Wendy, I'm going out for awhile!"

She came to the kitchen door, flour to her elbows, and said, "Well, if you must. But remember, it's dinner at *six*."

The key rattled in the kennel lock and the hounds jumped at the fence, baying. *Right-o!* There was my Mignonne, her teats still heavy from our last litter. The pack bounded out the door, and I found her. With a boost from his squire, George got in the saddle of the Clydesdale. We got a sense of where George was going and took off. He hadn't taken us on his Quest before, but we were ready. His armor was at home on the scarecrow, he had nothing now but his sword, shield, and us.

"*That* way, lads!" he bawled.

We bounded through the grass toward the river, closing in on its smell of fish. A breeze stopped us short and we sniffed a nice whiff of cottage compost, then raced on, George on his Clydesdale cantering behind us. We jumped a wall and reached the water. George got onto his knees and drank while we crowded the shore, pushing and lapping. When he stood again, George stared over the river and sniffed. An *odor* was wafting across. We lowered our heads and growled.

George cried, "*Go*, lads!"

He climbed back on his horse, and I plunged into the water behind the Clydesdale and paddled. I barked, choked, and went under, and when I came up I was the only dog still swimming with George. Mignonne and the others were pacing the muddy shore. She, thinking of our pups, of course. The others were only hunters, not guards. They now knew what they were really up against.

We got out on the other side to a horrible scent dripping from the trees and bushes. I sneezed and retched.

George cried, "It's just the two of us now, Reggie!"

We found the nearby bushes strewn with a lady's clothes. Worried, I sniffed a torn stocking and wimple. I whined until I realized I couldn't smell any fear.

But, George roared, "So it's come to *this*! Hurry, Reggie!"

We pushed through the brush to the foot of a hill. Tall trees, too noble to water, drooped their branches around the door of a cave. Sniffing at the litter of bones and hide, I turned over the ribs of a poor stray and drew back my lips in fury.

George jumped down and slapped his Clydesdale back through the bushes. He said, "Reggie, it's do or die."

We crept into the cave, and I followed his smell and the sound of his sword tapping along the walls of the dark passage. We turned a corner to gleams of fire, wiggling and waving around a single huge shadow. George raised his shield and pointed his sword.

We peered into a huge hall. High walls glittered toward darkness over the Dragon's bent head. The banked fire inside him, glowing from nose and mouth, was all the light we needed. On top of a smoking dump of old mattresses, candle sticks, crowns and trash, sprawled the Dragon, with leftover shreds of lettuce and turnip tops around him, chomping the joint of an ox held between his claws. He was covered with scales the size of Wendy's hand mirror from head to tail, but still, there was something faintly *doggy* about him. He thumped his tail once on the dusty mound as he cracked the bone for its marrow. *Borzois and boar hounds, what WAS he?* When he rose to his haunches, I ran past George to keep the Beast off him.

The Dragon growled and a smell like spoiling eggs settled over me. I shook myself and growled back. It sounded pretty pitiful.

"Steady, Reggie," said George.

The Dragon dropped a jealous claw over the ox bone and lowered his wings. Veins like tree branches throbbed in them. Out of the corner of one eye, I saw George tiptoeing up behind him. The Dragon turned his bearded chin toward George and growled a long warning. That did it: I jumped for the throat.

When I came to, I found him leaning over George, wet nostrils taking his scent as he lay under the great head. George was knocked out on his back, his open hand empty, inches from the teeth. I limped to George's sword, dropped it in his hand, and nuzzled him. The Dragon noticed me then and growled with a sound like slowly nearing thunder. George woke up and rolled away, and I sprang for the nose.

I'd done it before, a bull in a barnyard. As soon as I was on him, the Dragon shook his head, but I clenched my jaws with a ton of tightening pressure. He dashed me against the treasure, but I closed my eyes and held on. He couldn't roar and use his fire. His pain, I knew, would be terrible, running up through his quivering snout into his eyes and skull. This was the chance for George to use his sword. The Dragon turned and took a swipe at him with his tail. As I hung on, I saw George jumping, sword in hand. Then, the familiar glint of metal. I didn't see George strike, just felt the Dragon's shock. There was a fiery flash, a hiss of reeking steam, and the Dragon trembled, eyebrow to tail, splayed his claws and sank down.

I held on until George grabbed my collar and pulled me off. His sword was dripping with blood. I wagged, and he knelt and put his face in my fur.

Then he slumped to a scorched stool and blew his breath out through his mustache. I sat beside him on a bit of rug. He leaned, elbows on knees, slowly tapping the end of the sword on the floor.

Soon he blinked red eyelids, scratched his head and said, "I suppose it's time to take the trophy. But to be truthful, Reggie, I'm not sure how to go about it. I've neglected putting a new edge on my sword for weeks. It was a lucky thrust, and *you*. This thing wouldn't slice a leg of mutton."

He sighed. "But, I suppose I've got to at least *try*." He stood and complained, "Uhh," then bent for bits and scraps for a torch. "It'll be dark in here soon with the Dragon cooling." He shoved the bound scraps past the tongue and lit them at the throat. He raised the torch and studied the huge neck. "But, what indeed is my *object*, I ask you; a bit of glory that will fly in a fortnight? Still, without the head, will anyone believe me?"

I barked.

"That is, except *you*. Let's just go home. Who cares what Sir Robert would do."

* * *

When we got to the river, we found her who had strewn her clothes. She was up a tree, clad in her shift. When she saw George she lifted a hand to her brow and said, "Help me, Knight, help me!"

He dropped his weapons and ran. She leaned out of the tree into his arms. He set her on her feet and pulled her straying locks from his shoulders.

Curtsying, she said, "A thousand, thousand thank you's for helping me out of the tree, Kind Sir."

George blushed and lifted his eyebrows.

I padded over and said, “Harumph,” thinking of Wendy.

The Lady said, “Sir, can you give me a ride to my father’s fortress?”

George scratched his head. “Sorry, but I believe my horse went back to the castle, and my wife will be waiting dinner. How far is it? Perhaps Reggie can walk you.”

Plucking her gown from a branch, she said, “I think I’ll just wait for Sir Robert Fortesque.”

“He may not come by. The Dragon is dead, you know.”

Her mouth formed a small O. She bent for her slippers and hurried to the lane bordered by singed hawthorn. Then she turned, waved, and cupped her hands, yelling, “Too bad you’re not *single*!”

When she was gone, George eyed his shoulders, picking off a strand of long hair. “Right-o!” he said, then we swam the river for home—George with the shield, me with the sword.

Mignonne was waiting on the other side. She nuzzled my paw and fell into step beside me. The pack and the Clydesdale had run home. So, it was just the three of us, stopping at the Pub for a brew and some bones.

Yanking the door, George said, “They’re probably already drunk enough to believe me, Reggie.”

In the yard, I told the tale of My First Quest to the beagles and mutts, lifting my injured paw at just the right moment with a startling yelp, and hanging my head humbly at the Passing of the Dragon.

George appeared again as the church clock struck six, singing in bass, “Non Nobis, Domine!” I stood with a paw on his chest as he rubbed my ears, then limped on ahead with Mignonne.

When George got home, Wendy was already fussing over me with a bandage and scissors. He threw his weapons on the kitchen table, bent her backwards in his arms, and kissed her.

When they untangled he rubbed his hands together and said, “Is that stew I smell? How delightful, Wendy.”

She held him away from her nose and said, “Th! What a stench on you and the dogs, *and* . . . a bit of an unmistakable savor of *malt*. I can tell you what happened, Georgie. You killed It and stopped at the Pub coming home.”

I turned and sniffed my matted haunches, then smiled at Mignonne. The odor was nothing a little roll in a cow-pie and walk in the rain with her wouldn’t cure.

The End

Maria Ott Tatham is a writer of fantasy, mystery, and historical fiction, and an editorial assistant for The Mythic Circle. She lives with her husband Tom in Northwest Ohio. English was her college major. “Me, George and the Dragon” resulted from her Mother’s favorite query, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to know what the dog is thinking?’ Her fairy tales have appeared in The Mythic Circle.

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remember my name.”

“Oh, that? I just woke up. What do you expect? It has nothing to do with this.”

I reached over and placed my hand on hers in an effort to comfort her, but she withdrew. “What if it’s contagious,” she snapped.

I hadn’t thought of that. The shock changed the shape of the argument. I sat back and sighed. “I ... I’ll make an appointment in the morning.” I saw the question in her eyes and answered, “Yesterday, at the unemployment office, I saw a flyer on medical assistance for low-income families. Maybe we could look into it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before?”

I shrugged. “I thought the doctor was going to tell me to take a couple of aspirin or something.”

She narrowed her eyes, crossed her arms, and sat back.

“Besides,” I continued, “there’s a man hanging around the unemployment office who stares at me the whole time I’m there.”

“Has he hurt you?”

“No.”

“So what’s the problem?”

My pride. I thought I could handle my own problems. Anyone who survived the war in Bosnia could. But if it endangered my family, my pride would have to be sacrificed. “No problem,” I said getting up. “I’ll fill out the form in the morning. I’m going to bed now. You want to join me?”

She nodded.

I walked over and held out my arms for a hug. This time, she accepted.

* * *

I grasped at the withering remains of a dream. Sitting hunched at the edge of my bed in cold sweat, I wove together a disjointed story. I could only feel them at first. I felt like I was much more than I appeared—not in a god-like, supernatural way, but in a broader human sense that I couldn’t yet wrap my thoughts around.

As the images took tangible form, I captured them. I recalled a Viking warship and a Spanish galleon, a debate among ancient Roman senators and the court of King Louis the Sixteenth, a look of terror in the face of a comrade sitting in a foxhole across from me and the look of joy in a toddler’s eyes as I held her high; the memories of a thousand lives. Each face I saw brought a flood of emotions, but I could not give them a name or remember their history.

Two of the images disturbed me more than the others. I saw a spacecraft the size of a city and cyborgs with snake-



like appendages. If this were an ordinary dream, I would have dismissed them and rolled over to sleep. But, like the other images, these brought with them their associated memories just outside conscious reach. I knew them, not through an abstract dream, but through concrete experience. I remembered how to find the bathroom on the spacecraft, and I remembered running my fingers along cold, cyborg steel until it blended with skin.

I would have attributed this to eating too much *piernik* before bed except that, in the static of so many memories, I had forgotten who I was. It was a sensation I would not want to relive, and it made my hunt for memories more frantic. I felt lost like a child abandoned; frantic and helpless, falling in darkness without a handhold. My fingers started tingling and my body felt as if it was slipping away. Then, help came out of the darkness behind me.

"Alex, are you all right?" It was my Jana, and my memory returned, not at the sound of my name, but at the timbre of her voice.

"I'm fine." I looked at the clock and it showed four minutes past three. "Just a bad dream." I lay awake the rest of the night haunted by the images. My fingers tingled and my body felt weightless. These memories weren't the disjointed afterglow of a dream gone bad. They were distant memories.

* * *

Waiting in an unemployment office feels like a cross between a doctor's office visit and standing in a food line back in the old country. The walls and furniture are as colorless as the people's faces. Most people waiting didn't engage in conversation, which left the sounds of clicking keyboards, a ticking wall clock, and an occasional cough to fill the room. A stale and dusty smell wafted through the waiting area every time someone opened the front door. One would never come here unless one had to.

I leaned against the counter, filling out the medical assistance form. I was half-way through when a man came up next to me, but I didn't look up. I learned it was better not to. It usually led to unwanted conversation. With a heavy accent, I have to repeat myself or find other words to make someone understand. I needed the practice, but I didn't have the time.

"Excuse me," he said and I looked up. My blood ran cold. It was the staring man. He was tall, with a narrow face and squeezed features. He wore baggy clothes that made me think he was worse off than I. I would have dismissed him, if it weren't for the intensity in his eyes.

"You have seen them, haven't you?" he asked in a hushed, raspy voice.

I looked around. "Seen who?"

He pointed up. "Them."

I followed his finger. "I am not understanding. There is no floor above us."

He drew closer and whispered in a harsh voice, "No, the aliens. They have taken you."

"I am an alien, but I have green card." I patted my shirt pocket.

He stepped back with eyes wide, and then smiled. "Not that kind of alien. People from the stars. They have taken you in their space ship and done things to you."

Oh, I understood. This man was in the wrong government office. He should have been in the mental health department. I smiled weakly and pulled a form off the counter at random. "Yes. I am filling out form now, okay?" I started filling in the boxes. Maybe he would get the hint and move on.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the man move towards the door. As he walked behind

me, he said, "That's why your hands tingle and you dream the dream of many lives."

I froze. A second later stale, stale air blew past me. I turned and he was gone.

How did he know? I didn't show any symptoms. It wasn't in any forms I filled out. Only my wife and doctor knew. Maybe there was something going around ... no, the doctor said he hadn't seen anything like it before.

I dropped the pen and dashed out the door. I saw him at an intersection, waiting for the light to turn. I was in the inner-city. Traffic was heavy and parking hard to find. Loose newspaper littered the gutters and who-knew-what stained the sidewalks.

"Wait," I yelled. "Mister!" Several heads turned, but not his. I ran after him and the light changed. I saw him step out, but his form was quickly covered by others walking with him and a cloud of diesel exhaust expelled by a bus. I ran harder, feeling my leg muscles tighten. I knew there was a reason why I should have exercised more.

I got another glimpse of the staring man weaving through the crowd. I kept my eyes locked on his form, not wanting to lose him. That was why I didn't see what hit me as I crossed the intersection. I felt a sharp jarring motion and the sudden firm press of asphalt. My ears rang and my vision went white. Pain seared through my left side and my head felt numb. Through double vision, as I stared up into the sky, a crowd gathered around me. I felt a warm liquid gather in my mouth and trickle down my cheek. As it grew dark, I recognized one face in the crowd, the staring man. He was smiling. Why? I tried to say something but couldn't. Darkness fell. My life passed before my eyes, not in a sequence but in an instant, as if a veil covering all my memories had been lifted.

My final thought was not what I would have chosen. It was not something religious like, "Dear Lord, I'm coming home." And it wasn't selfless like, "I wish I had spent more time with my wife and children." It was simply, "But the signal said, 'Walk.'"

* * *

Time had no meaning. My head—I thought I still had one—throbbed, and I had lost all sense of direction. At some point during this void, my vision started to clear. I could make out the form of two attendees standing over me, a darkly tanned man and woman. The man who I was chasing was gone. My side no longer hurt, but I didn't feel quite right. Something tactile, something around me I couldn't put my finger on it. Then I knew. The tingling was gone. I flexed my fingers and they felt right; in fact, they felt better than right, euphoric.

Is this heaven? Hell? I closed my eyes and concentrated to keep my thoughts in order. Is this a hospital? Opening my eyes again, I saw that the two people didn't speak, but looked at each other with varying expressions, almost as if they could read each others' minds.

I recalled the staring man's comments. Is this an alien abduction? I dismissed the thought as soon as it entered my mind. This had to be a hospital. I had no sense of motion, so we probably weren't flying. The attendants looked human enough. They wore long, white gowns that reminded me of lab coats. That was somewhat reassuring, something I would expect to see in a hospital. But something seemed to be missing, if it was a hospital. I lay there as my mind cleared trying to think of what it was. Then it came to me. There was no antiseptic smell and no pages for Dr. Smith echoing down the hall.

When I tried to get up, the couple pressed me gently back, speaking for the first time. "Relax, Tenbu. The doctor will be here soon." Tenbu? Why would she call me that? It was

probably a technical term or something. I eased, and then tensed when I realized that she had not spoken English or even Serbian but some other language. I couldn't think of its name, but I understood it.

I raised my hands to gesture and saw that my skin was darker, like theirs. I sat up abruptly, heart pounding, and saw that I was in a large room with people on a row of beds like mine.

Above them, images danced as if in a vision, scenes from everyday life but at an accelerated rate. Each person had their own set of images. The walls were curved in from bottom to top and slightly luminescent. What kind of hospital was this? My suspicions of an alien abduction were starting to be confirmed.

The attendants had turned to coax me down. A second later two men entered the room, one in a white lab coat and the other in blue. The male attendant next to me said, "It's all right, Tenbu. The doctor is here."

Without a word the other two men approached. The one they called the doctor held up my chin and looked into my eyes. I thought the man looked like a doctor. He was tall with a solid chin, graying hair at the temples, dark skin like the first two, and gentle, speculative eyes. Without warning, the doctor's irises changed. Concentric rings turned clockwise and counter clockwise, interlocked, changed hue, and glowed.

I jerked back, but the doctor held me fast. "He's lost para-neuron cohesion," the doctor said to the attendants in that strange language. "Hold him still." They grabbed me before I could react, but I fought back. The struggle made enough noise to wake the others in the room, though none of them stirred. Then the doctor held his hand before my face. I tried jerking away, but the others held my head steady. Out from the doctor's fingertips snaked long, metallic tendrils.

With the sudden strength of a cornered animal I slipped my arms free of their grasp. I shoved the doctor's hand, writhing tentacles and all, towards the first male attendant who jerked back, giving a way of escape. I dashed towards the door and out into a hallway. I ignored the shouts coming from behind me and searched frantically for an exit sign. I saw nothing in English. And although I recognized the alien characters and understood the words they represented, I only saw signs representing lecture halls and vision suites. Then, as I turned down another hall, my tormentors in pursuit, I saw it—an exit. I had no idea what I would do after I ran through it, but it at least represented some tangible goal of freedom.

Despite an increasing pounding in my head, my mind raced with possibilities. I knew now that this was not a hospital, at least not for the physically impaired, and this was more like hell than any heaven I had ever heard of. The faces I passed did not have the desperate look of prisoners or the zombie eyes of alien abductees. They appeared to be at peace, except for the astonished look of a woman who I almost ran into.

I could see the green of a courtyard brightly lit by sunlight through the exit door. At least I wasn't on a spaceship. The sunlight compelled me forward with renewed fervor.

Then I saw the floor.

Something had tripped me and the impact stole my breath. I turned to see two men, or what appeared to be men, holding me down, and the doctor and others running up to me. Without hesitation or preamble of bedside manner the doctor reached forward and the tendrils attached to my scalp. I heard a click as each one connected, and this was, perhaps, the most unsettling sensation of all, hearing metal on metal—the realization that the mating connector was already on or in me.

My vision grew heavy and dark, as I felt unconsciousness take hold. Given another chance

for a profound last thought, I blew it again. The last thought I ever had as Alexander Sevcik was, "Oh no. I have alien implants."

* * *

The scene before my eyes cleared, and I knew myself as Tenbu Tinochika.

The doctor, who I now remembered was Dr. Danjuma, Professor of Humanity Studies, detached his tendrils and smiled. He offered me his hand.

I accepted and walked back to the classroom hanging my head in embarrassment. I lay down on the interface bed without a word.

Dr. Danjuma held my gaze and said in a matter-of-fact tone, "That's the third time this week, Tenbu. Stick with the character this time, or you'll never pass the exam on 20th Century America."

"I will do better," I answered in our native Vantush language. It was the year AD 2519, and I was a student on academic probation. Humanity Studies was a mandatory course ever since the AI revolution and the melding of man and machine.

The doctor placed his hand on the side of the bed. His tendrils emerged and plugged into it. "Let's take a look at how you lost para-neuron cohesion, shall we?" He stared into space, his eyes flicking back and forth, seeing what I could not. "Hmmm. Who were you chasing before the accident?"

"Some strange man who kept staring at me. Was he another student? Someone who hacked into the simulation? He said something about"

"No one hacks into the system, young man, and he's not a student. This is not a cross-simulation course. In fact, he never existed." He continued scanning the air with unseeing eyes. "Yes, he was a figment of your imagination created by your subconscious."

"How can that be?"

"Your hypothalamus implant isn't secreting enough pseudo-melatonin. People your age typically secrete about five to twenty-five micrograms of melatonin per day. I'm reading only two. You've been experiencing sleep deprivation. During the simulation, your implants are supposed to speed up your circadian clock. They do this to keep up with the simulation's six hundred thousand fold temporal acceleration. Your subconscious knows it's in a simulation. It tried to disengage, and one of the side effects was hallucinations." He chuckled. "Hallucinations during a simulation, it sounds like an oxymoron." His head tilted slightly. "It also appears that you had some disturbing dreams."

I nodded. Then I caught myself, realizing he couldn't see. "Yes."

"And tingling of the extremities?"

"Yes, I ..."

"Don't worry. A little calibration is all that's needed."

"But, I ..."

"There, done." He disengaged from the bed and looked at me with seeing eyes. "Now, you've lived thirty-six years of Alexander Sevcik's life. You've seen what life was like as an American immigrant in the last half of the 20th Century. I'm going to start you on the next simulation. His name is Ron Brown, steelworker in Cleveland during the 1930s depression, and he"

"Please," I grabbed the doctor's arm, "let me finish Alexander's life. I want to know what

happens next.”

Dr. Danjuma peeled my hand off his arm. “I’m glad to see you finally take your studies seriously, but your classmates have just finished the Alexander Sevcik simulation, and have started the next one.”

“Yes, but it won’t take long. How much longer does he live?”

“Only another forty years, but since you’ve been racing around the hall in your underwear”

I felt like I was losing a friend, and my chest tightened with desperation borne of self-preservation. “But that’s only 20 minutes in real time. Please.”

Dr. Danjuma’s disengaged from the bed and studied my eyes. “You can’t,” he sighed. “The simulation schedule does not allow it.” He took on a stern teacher-knows-best demeanor. “You will, of course, have to complete an extra credit assignment to make up for all this mess.”

I stared at him. I never had to do this before.

He placed his hand on the bed interface for reprogramming. “I will send you back as Jonathan Nichols.”

“Who’s that? I don’t remember that name on the study guide.”

“Sit back,” he said, and I complied. “Mr. Nichols hired Alexander one week after you walked him in front of a car. The accident never happened, of course. The simulation just let you botch that one. In the real history, Mr. Nichols gave him the start he needed. Without the mentoring of Jonathan Nichols, Alexander Sevcik would never have become the father of Cybernetics.” Dr. Danjuma smiled.

I closed my eyes. I felt myself slipping out of my body and into the body of an infant. My self-identity began to ebb; my memories were fading.

I heard Dr. Danjuma’s voice saying, “Keep your focus. Remember why we are doing this. You will feel their struggle and despair, their joys and loves. You will have empathy for our ancestors and experience life before revolution.” The last thing I remembered before I became Jonathan Nichols was the doctor’s words: “We do not want to forget our biological heritage, now do we?”

The End

After graduating with degrees in Theology and Electrical Engineering, Darrell embarked on his career as an electrical engineer, school director, landlord, and father of six. In an effort to prove that the need for sleep is an illusion, he strives to fulfill his dream of writing novels for the “Epi Epic.”

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kingdoms. The two became great friends and spent almost all their time together. They studied together, practised skill at arms together, hunted and rode together. In appearance they could not have been more different. Tannenbarl was tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, his hair cropped short and his body solid with muscle. Hamet was shorter, slender as a willow wand, with long dark hair and brown eyes. He taught Tannenbarl the intricacies of chess and dancing and how to fashion mere words into song and verse. In return, Tannenbarl instructed his friend in the martial arts of sword and shield. Both learned quickly, but neither could ever outdo the other. Games of chess always went to Hamet, and Tannenbarl would always win bouts with the sword even though both of them could overcome other opponents.

Eventually, Hamet's fosterage at Rufain's court came to an end, and he returned to his father's Caliphate. He did not return alone, for the King, recognising the value of ties between the two lands, sent his own son as an emissary. Accompanied by Edden, his young and faithful squire, Tannenbarl rode with Hamet into the shifting sands of the Great Desert, to the walled city state of Razmanabad. It was not what Tannenbarl had expected of a city surrounded by desert. Its white walls gleamed in the sun, as did the great onion domes of the minarets and mosques, tiled and tipped in gold. Unlike his own city the streets were clean and free of refuse and the stink of garbage. Fountains sparkled and sang in the squares, and large areas of the city were planted with trees and grass and set aside for public parks. It was paradise, a jeweled oasis in the desert wastes. And it all paled to nothing beside the beauty of Jahzeera.

Adorned in his ceremonial silver armour, Tannenbarl was presented to the Caliph of Razmanabad, Al'Rezzani Ibn Hamet Ibn Al'Raisha, in the splendour of his palace. Tannenbarl received and returned the traditional greeting of hand to heart, mouth, and forehead before being embraced in more informal fashion by the Caliph.

"Be welcome in my city, Tannenbarl, Prince of the West and spirit-brother to my son."

A second figure moved from the shadows to stand beside the Caliph. The old man, still tall and proud, with a trimmed silver beard beneath his hawk-like nose and piercing eyes, gestured towards this figure.

"My son you have already met. Allow me now to present my daughter, Jahzeera."

The young girl stepped gracefully forward and bowed to Tannenbarl. She was slim like her brother and had the same dark hair, flowing in a great cascade to her waist. She was dressed in garments of pale-hued silk that left her arms and midriff bare. Silver chains glittered at her neck, waist, and wrists. A thin veil covered her face, leaving only her eyes visible. These also were like her brother's, dark and solemn. Tannenbarl dropped to one knee before her, took her hand and brushed his lips against it.

"My lady, all the splendours of your father's city fail to compete with your beauty. I am your humble servant."

Jahzeera laughed in pleasure, her voice chiming like crystal as she urged the knight to stand.

"You are very kind and also very presumptuous. I have all the servants I could ever need. Perhaps you would consent instead to be my friend?"

This time the audience chamber was filled with the sound of Tannenbarl's laughter. He bowed again, from the waist, and declared that it would be his greatest pleasure to count Hamet's sister amongst his friends. That first night saw a banquet in Tannenbarl's honour. Great platters of roasted meats and delicacies of the East were served, washed down by cool sweet drinks and accompanied by musicians and dancers of great skill. Tannenbarl barely noticed. The greatest part of his attention was concentrated on Jahzeera. He discussed matters

of state with the Caliph and shared reminiscences of their time in Rufain's court with Hamet, but whenever the chance permitted he turned his eyes to the Caliph's daughter.

During the weeks that followed Tannenbarl spent as much time in Jahzeera's presence as he could. When he was not touring the city with Hamet or attending meetings with the Caliph and his advisors, he would sit with her in one of the palace gardens. They would watch the peacocks strut across the lawns as they talked, or walk by the lily ponds. The two grew ever closer. A fact that did not go unnoticed.

The first signs of trouble appeared during a fencing session. Hamet was endeavouring to learn the skills of the rapier and had prevailed upon Tannenbarl to continue his instruction. The Prince found himself resenting Hamet's request and would far rather have spent time in Jahzeera's company. His mind was distracted, his attention only partly focused on the sword in his hand. Consequently Hamet was able to pierce Tannenbarl's half-hearted defence on three occasions, finally sending the rapier spinning from his opponent's hand. Tannenbarl recovered his sword, shook his stinging fingers, and laughed as he congratulated Hamet on his victory.

"A good match. Your first win. You are getting better my friend."

Hamet stared at the outstretched hand that Tannenbarl was offering him and ignored it. There was anger in his eyes as he replied.

"I would have enjoyed the victory far more had I earned it rather than having it given to me. There is no pleasure in a contest with one whose mind is so clearly on other matters. If you did not wish to be here why did you not simply say?"

Tannenbarl frowned, withdrawing his hand.

"I am sorry Hamet. You are right; my thoughts were elsewhere. I promised Jahzeera that I would tell her of the mountains of my homeland, of the forests and the winter snow. She has never seen such things, Hamet. I would dearly love to show them to her. Please do not be angry with me, my friend. We will re-fight this match tomorrow, I promise."

Hamet's sudden anger turned to concern. He placed a hand on Tannenbarl's shoulder.

"Tannenbarl, I see that your feelings towards Jahzeera run deep. This is not good. You should put aside these thoughts, for no good can come of them. Come with me. Let us ride out into the desert, feel the wind upon our faces and the taste of sand in our mouths. Forget Jahzeera."

Now it was Tannenbarl's turn to show anger. He thrust aside Hamet's hand, blood rushing to his face as he replied.

"How can you ask me to simply hide my feelings! Hamet, I love your sister and she feels the same way. I cannot forget her. I intend to ask your father for Jahzeera's hand. I would have your blessing for this."

Hamet lowered his eyes to the floor and shook his head sadly.

"No, my friend, do not do this. Jahzeera is a princess of the Desert Blood. It is forbidden for her to marry outside of her own people. Her hand has long been promised to one of the other great Desert Lords. No matter how much my father likes you, no matter how deeply he desires ties with your father's kingdom, he will not grant you this. And I cannot ask him to."

Tannenbarl's lips drew together as he turned away from Hamet. His shoulders were stiff with pride as he walked out of the room, his voice taut with suppressed anger.

"Then I will ask him without your aid."

The following day Tannenbarl sought an audience with the Caliph. Hamet was already present when Tannenbarl walked into Al'Rezzani's private chamber. He sat cross-legged on a seat of cushions, refusing to meet his friend's gaze, keeping his eyes fixed on the hands crossed

at his lap. The old Caliph smiled at Tannenbarl, sensing the tension in the young knight, offered him sweet apple tea and asked him to sit. Tannenbarl nodded his head briefly in acknowledgement, accepted the hot drink and lowered himself to the floor. The Caliph poured himself a drink and also sat, sipping slowly at his cup. Tannenbarl set aside his own drink, eager to plead his case.

“My Lord Caliph, I believe you know why I am here.”

Tannenbarl’s eyes flickered towards Hamet as he spoke. The Caliph nodded to indicate that he had already spoken with his son.

“I know what is in your heart and mind. It does not give me any joy to repeat words that you have already heard from Hamet. I cannot grant you what you ask, Tannenbarl. Jahzeera will one day marry the ruler of another Desert city, thus ensuring continued peace and good will between the states. Our laws and customs forbid her to marry an outsider, no matter his wealth or titles or the strength of his love.”

Tannenbarl clenched his fists, keeping a firm grip on the passions threatening to erupt from him, and pleaded with the Caliph to change his mind. Al’Rezzani closed his ears to the pleas, reiterating his position. It saddened him to have to refuse Tannenbarl, for in his heart he knew that the young prince would be a good match for his spirited daughter. Yet the customs and traditions of a thousand years could not be put aside, not even by a Caliph. Especially not by a Caliph. He interrupted Tannenbarl’s speech, deliberately setting a harsh tone to his voice.

“Be silent, Prince of the West, and hear me. I give now my final judgment on this matter. It shall not be. Jahzeera will not be your wife. You must speak no more of this. Nor shall you see my daughter again. For the sake of your friendship with my son, I ask that you content yourself with the company of others and continue your studies here. If you cannot do this and persist with your foolishness, then you must leave this city and return to your own lands.”

The Caliph stood as he pronounced his judgement, Hamet and Tannenbarl rising with him. The young knight bristled with injured pride and suppressed anger. He gave a brief nod of his head before turning on his heel and stalking from the room. The Caliph shook his head, sighing deeply. Hamet also sighed. Sadness mingled with exasperation at his friend’s behaviour as he considered Tannenbarl’s likely response to his father’s words.

He is a passionate man. When we play chess he lets his heart rule his head, rushing in when he should wait, causing his downfall. Yet with a sword in his hand he is cool and calculating, always controlled. Until yesterday, when his thoughts were turned to Jahzeera. I hope I am wrong, but I do not believe that he will simply walk away from her.

He kept his thoughts to himself and hoped that Tannenbarl would not do anything rash.

* * *

The cloaked stranger paused his tale and reached for the wine skin. He coughed as the cold liquid touched his dry throat, and rubbed his lips with the sleeve of his left arm. His right arm remained at his side. Despite the heat from the fire, he showed no inclination to remove his cloak or even to lower his hood. Aside from the occasional shout for another drink, the men gathered around the campfire were maintaining a hushed and attentive silence.

* * *

Tannenbarl had decided not to heed the Caliph’s warning. In truth, following his

conversation with Hamet the previous day, he had not expected to receive the Caliph's consent. Instead he had already spoken to Jahzeera and asked her to leave with him, regardless of her father's decision. His squire, Edden, eager to serve his beloved knight in any way, had agreed to pass messages to one of the princess' handmaidens. For the next two days Tannenbarl continued to attend meetings with the Caliph's advisors, studying the history and customs of the Desert peoples. When not engaged in such studies, he kept to his rooms, avoiding Hamet. As Hamet had already noted, Tannenbarl was a man who preferred quick action. Once his mind was made up, he saw no reason to wait. So, two nights after his meeting with the Caliph, with only a sliver of moon to challenge the darkness, he set in motion his plan to spirit Jahzeera from the palace.

Edden packed Tannenbarl's armour and the rest of their belongings into saddlebags and quietly readied their horses for travel. He led them around the silent gardens to the wing in which Jahzeera kept her apartments. Tannenbarl, rapier belted at his waist and dressed in a lightweight tunic, breeches and cloak of dark material, made his own way through the palace grounds. No guards patrolled Al'Rezzani's peaceful home, and the few who stood upon the walls of the gatehouse and at the main entrance to the residence were complacent and inattentive. Tannenbarl slipped unnoticed through the ornamental gardens and climbed the wide marble stairs of the women's quarters to Jahzeera's rooms. He tapped quietly at her door, stepping quickly inside as Jahzeera opened it. She wrapped her arms around Tannenbarl's waist and rested her head on his shoulder briefly. The only illumination in the room came from the dull glow of coals in an iron brazier by the door. Yet there was enough light for Tannenbarl to see from the tightness of her lips and her wide eyes that she was frightened. A moment of doubt clouded his thoughts, prompting him to speak.

"Are you sure that you wish to leave with me, beloved? You realise that we will both be exiled. We will have to forge our own way in the world, without privilege or rank?"

Jahzeera stepped back and lifted her head high, meeting Tannenbarl's stare. She was dressed in dark clothes, suitable both for riding and for the cold of the desert night. She held his stare for a moment before answering.

"I am ready my love. I will miss my father and my brother, but I would miss you more. If we are to be together, then the sacrifice will be worthwhile."

She moved to the bed where a small bag of possessions lay. Before she could collect it the door flew open, revealing a slim figure silhouetted against the light of the corridor. Steel hissed as a scimitar was drawn from its scabbard and the figure stepped into the room. Dark shadows flickered across his face as he stepped forward past the brazier.

"So this is how you repay my father's hospitality and my friendship? You were warned to leave Jahzeera alone, Tannenbarl. How dare you disobey the Caliph's command so blatantly? What would you do, steal my sister away into the night? And you, Jahzeera, you would defy your family and your laws for this man? Would you make yourself a whore for him?"

Hamet's face was twisted into a grimace of rage as he spat the questions and accusations at the lovers. Jahzeera leapt towards him, her hands clutching at his robe as she pleaded with her brother to remain calm. Hamet forced her away, throwing her physically back onto the bed. Tannenbarl's own temper rose as he witnessed this treatment of his beloved Jahzeera. His rapier leaped into his hand and he stepped between Hamet and the bed, raising the slender blade warningly.

"Lower your sword Hamet and leave Jahzeera alone. She has done no wrong. We love each other and we wish to be together. Can you not understand this?"

Hamet was beyond reason now, his anger consuming all remnants of his friendship with

the foreign prince. The scimitar slashed back and forth, ringing against Tannenbarl's rapier as he parried the blows. Once more the knight tried to reason with his furious opponent.

"Do not fight me Hamet! Remember that you have only ever beaten me once with the sword, and only then because I was distracted."

Hamet barked a laugh as he replied.

"Are you not distracted now then? And you have only ever faced me in practice, never in open combat. Who knows what difference that will make? Put up your sword, for you will not leave here with my sister."

As he spoke, he launched another assault against Tannenbarl's sword, attempting to use the heavier blade of the scimitar to break the slender rapier. From her perch on the bed Jahzeera watched as the two men she loved most fought each other. Her hands were clenched in the silk and satin drapes that tented her bed as she screamed at them to stop. The chime of the blades continued as the two men sought an advantage. Hamet plunged the point of the scimitar forward towards Tannenbarl's stomach, an unusual move as the scimitar was primarily a slashing weapon. Tannenbarl parried, swiping the blade aside as he leapt backwards. His legs crashed against the heavy iron brazier, knocking it over in a scattering rush of hot coals, unbalancing himself. He was forced to drop to his knees to avoid a wild slashing stroke, and then watched in sudden horror as flames raged up the material draped around the bed. Hungry tongues of orange leaped across the bed and licked at the lacquered walls. Jahzeera screamed again, throwing herself away from the flames. Her feet tangled in the sheets, tripping her, and one of the burning drapes fell across her.

Tannenbarl, still on his knees, shouted a desperate warning as the hangings collapsed, burying Jahzeera in a shroud of flame. His attention, focused on her plight, distracted him from Hamet's next stroke. The scimitar flashed down, slicing through the bones of Tannenbarl's right wrist, sending his sword spinning to the floor. The knight screamed as lightning flared up his arm. Hamet had also seen Jahzeera's plight and Tannenbarl's reaction to it, but had been unable to halt the stroke he had launched. Now he turned from the stricken knight and plunged into the inferno that was Jahzeera's bed, reaching out for his sister.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside as Tannenbarl thrust the stump of his right wrist into the flames raging before him. The pain from Hamet's blow was nothing compared to the inferno that seared his wound, charring the skin and bone. His head swam as he tried to stand, forcing his legs to carry him forward to Jahzeera's aid. Instead of obeying his commands, they buckled beneath him and he fell backwards, away from the pyre that claimed the centre of the room. Arms caught him as he fell, supporting his weight and dragging him from the room. Words echoed in his head. He could hear them but they made no sense. He screamed Jahzeera's name over and over until his throat was sore. He was only half conscious as Edden hauled him from the room and half carried him down the stairs to the garden. Cries rang from within the palace, and running feet sounded as members of the Caliph's household rushed to confront the fire. The young squire, terrified for his master, forced Tannenbarl into the saddle of his horse, where he slumped across the animal's neck whispering "Jahzeera" over and over. Forcing the prince's feet into his stirrups, Edden led both of the horses through the darkened gardens away from the tragic scene. No one tried to stop him. No one noticed him. All of the guards and servants concentrated upon the fire raging through the princess's quarters. Edden led the two horses out of the Palace gates and into the quiet city streets. Then, having tied the unconscious knight to his mount and tended his wound, he mounted his own horse and made his way out of Razmanabad through the eastern gate, disappearing into the hostile Desert dunes.

* * *

The storyteller halted again, his head bowed. He raised it slowly as he spoke again, announcing the end of his tale.

“That is the last that was heard of Tannenbarl and his squire, and is the end of the tale I would tell you. You must decide for yourselves if it was worthy of a place by your fire.”

The hush in the camp gradually filled with voices as the travelers discussed aspects of the story. A few voices rose above the general buzz of conversation, shouting questions at the stranger.

“But what happened to the prince and his squire? Where did they go?”

“Was Jahzeera killed? What about Hamet?”

“You’re him aren’t you? You’re Tannenbarl? That’s why you hide behind a cloak and drink with your left hand!”

The last words caused another hush to descend as the audience waited expectantly for answers. The stranger rose slowly to his feet, a harsh, dry laugh escaping him.

“I do not know what happened to Tannenbarl and Edden. The last word I have of them comes from one of the guards upon the Eastern gate who watched two riders leave Razmanabad. Jahzeera died in the flames that destroyed her room and the lives of those inside it.”

He raised his right arm as he continued, pushing the hood of his cloak back. The sleeve of his robe dropped back, revealing a shriveled claw encased in charred skin. The right side of the face and head were similarly scarred, the right eye a milk-white ruin, and the hair gone.

“I am Hamet Ibn Al’Rezzani, son of the Caliph of Razmanabad. I survived the flames that claimed my sister and I seek these lands for word of Tannenbarl.”

The merchant, voice lowered in awe, wrung his hands together.

“You seek vengeance then, sir?”

Hamet turned his head towards the merchant, piercing him with the still sharp gaze of his remaining eye.

“No, my friend. I seek forgiveness.”

The End

Michael Graves works as a systems administrator for the European Space Agency. While keeping computer systems running he tries to entertain friends with short stories. His influences include David Gemmell and Bernard Cornwell. As far as writing is concerned his only success to date is winning a signed copy of a Matthew Reilly novel in a competition on his web-site.

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Pheron rolled his eyes again. Every Scarlet mage for the last hundred years had fallen to the Light.

“The Light!” the priestess declared, and the nobles broke into applause. The woman swayed back and forth, her hand still resting lightly on Emmeldra’s face, and began to chant.

*“Where the seagulls wheel,
There below the sounding stone
Waits the green-eyed destiny,
And you must come to this alone.
Where the ravens flap and cry,
Alone you will stand, between sea and sky,
And the Light will flare in the white fire,
And then you shall come to the end of desire.”*

Her hand dropped from Emmeldra’s face as if pushed, and then she turned to Hanir. “My lord prince,” she whispered. “You also are of the Light.

*“Where the moon river sings and flows,
There waits a single deadly foe.
There you must come, to defeat him sound,
Or he will poison all the kingdom’s ground.
Come there, and the world to Dark will not fall.
Watch and guard him, nobles all!”*

Pheron yawned as the applause followed. The prophecies were even worse than usual. He wondered if the priestess’s skill at doggerel ran out in her old age and if that was the real reason that now and then a young woman would replace her.

“Prince Leroth.”

Pheron turned his head to watch his younger brother walk forward. The fire’s shifting light glowed on blond hair, violet eyes, clenched fists. Pheron felt a moment of pity for Leroth. The Destiny that marked him was almost as strong—stronger, in some ways—than the cloud of it that hung around Hanir and Emmeldra, and his brother was just twelve, still young enough to take this kind of thing seriously.

“Put out your hand,” whispered the priestess.

Leroth swallowed and did so.

The fire swayed to the side, and a flash of pale light ran up Leroth’s arm. He turned around, his face lit with a smile now, and wind swirled around him, stirring the pale glow as if it were another kind of flame.

“A Gust mage,” said the priestess, telling everyone what they already should have known. Pheron winced as the applause crashed home on his ears again, echoing off the cave’s stone walls and ceiling. This was getting tiresome. “Stand still, my lord. I must step forward and put my hand on your face and tell you your Destiny.”

She did so, and Pheron made a silent bet with himself that the prophecy would involve the Dark in it somewhere.

Of course, it did.

*“Where the blood runs across the land in flood,
There you will learn the true promise of blood.
Child of Light, you will face the darkest Dark,
And defeat it, Gust mage, so hark
To the instructions that I give you now,
And never to any other give heed or bow.*

*“You must find the highest Light,
And then from your bow send it to the height.”*

More applause. Pheron yawned, his eyes almost falling shut. He had been awake three hours, and it was still an hour before the time he usually rose in the morning. The dawn had just begun to break outside, he noted, golden rays touching the stone at the entrance of the cave. He turned his head to watch and ignored the priestess until she spoke his name.

“My Lord Pheron.”

Pheron turned to face her, blinking. Was she really going to go through something they both knew was a charade, just to satisfy his mother and the nobles? He hadn’t thought she was that ignorant.

“I have no Destiny,” he said. “You know that.”

His mother’s hand closed on his shoulder. Pheron ignored her. She had her three heirs who were going to go on to grand destinies and save the world. That was the pattern that events always followed in this benighted kingdom and had followed for the last three generations. Never had a prince or princess been born outside the web of Destiny, but then again, never had a prince or princess been born without one of the higher mage-gifts.

“I need to know,” said the priestess, and her voice was stern. “Are you a Scarlet, Azure, Gust, or Crop mage?”

Pheron lifted his brows. She *was* going to do this. Very well. “This is the extent of my talent,” he said and held out a hand before him, concentrating.

A small, round ball of clay appeared in his palm.

The priestess took a tense step forward, staring at the clay as if she thought it might explode. Pheron rolled his eyes and lobbed it at her.

The priestess stepped back and let the clay fall to the floor of the cave. The nobles crowded forward, and Pheron winced. His mother’s grip on his shoulder had progressed to the point that he thought she was going to break bone.

“You cannot have no magic,” said the priestess. “Everyone descended from the royal line of Queen Aneron has magic.”

“I have it,” said Pheron and nodded to the clay ball on the floor. “It’s just not very impressive.”

The priestess shook her head and then his mother said, as clearly as if she were disowning him, “Yes, it’s true. He has never demonstrated any more magic than this. I had just hoped that he was being contrary, which he loves to do, but he doesn’t have any more.”

“A child of the royal line,” said the priestess. “No Destiny, no prophecy, no great magic. You will fall to the Dark.”

“Why?” asked Pheron. *Stars above, do they not understand?* “The Dark is interested in the royalty with great Destinies and in conquering the world. Why shouldn’t it leave me alone?”

The priestess had no answer for that. Pheron nodded and turned to walk from the cave.

"If you don't battle the Dark and become a great prince, what will you do?" the priestess asked his back.

Pheron glanced at her and bit back his chuckle. She wasn't that interested in what he would do. She was just worried that she had lost her touch for predicting Destinies, or that someone would think she had.

"I'll think of something," he said and stepped from the cave into the dawn.

It was getting brisk, the autumn wind rattling the leaves as it swept along the mountainside. Pheron took a deep breath of cold air to wake himself up, since he knew that he wouldn't get much sleep once they got back to the castle. His mother would declare the Destinies to the populace, and there would be much rejoicing.

He took another breath and approached his horse.

Chapter One

Green-Eyed Destiny

334 OR, Early Autumn

"It is in the shadow between the darkness and the self that we learn whom we truly are. If we could not learn this, then we would never change. If we could never change, we would never become whom we are meant to be. And who we are meant to be is at the center of the ever-spinning wheel of Destiny, at the center of the pinnacle of death and rebirth, and at the center of everyone's fondest desire. But remember that, although many aspire to Destiny, not all may carry it. It chooses its own, and those who bear it are capable of bearing it, with all the wonder and the terror and the awe that that inspires. They are of the royal lines. They are of the blood of the Queens."

—Teros Kinessi, Lord of Shadow and Scarlet, High Mage of the Circle of Ameras, writing in the Scroll of Starlight.

"Emmeldra, help me... help me..."

Cyreelee reached for her, blue eyes wide, golden hair swirling around her as the flames consumed her. Emmeldra lunged forward. She could catch her friend's hand if she stretched just a little.

But, of course, her fingers closed only on empty air. Emmeldra opened her eyes and surveyed the room dully. It had only been a vision, a glimpse of what the destruction of her best friend must have looked like. Cyreelee had always had a Destiny. Emmeldra had just never known that that Destiny was to die in the first wave of Dark attacks.

A knock on the door shattered her weeping. "Sister?"

Emmeldra stood up straight, drying her tears with a small, called wisp of fire. She couldn't let her twin know that she was this upset over Cyreelee's death, or he would try to comfort her. And she wanted to bear this pain alone, as she knew should be done. Destiny-bearing ones shouldn't complain about the weight that they bore for the good of all the kingdom.

But when she opened her door, she saw the truth in Hanir's eyes, and she had to look away for a moment.

"Torran?" she asked.

"Yes."

Emmeldra opened her arms, and they fell together, clinging and crying.

"It wasn't quick," said Hanir when he could recover his breath. "I know it wasn't. I had... visions... the most horrific visions of his last moments. He died under torture, Emmy." He raised his head and stared into her face with such a pathetic expression that Emmeldra ignored the awful nickname that she didn't let anyone but her brother call her and even him not often. "They severed his limbs, and they whipped him, and—"

"Hush," she said, hugging him back and lapsing into the private language they had shared since they were two. "*Jekal illiko pyol*, it is a weight that we must carry," she whispered in his ear.

Hanir pulled his head back and regarded her, eyes solemn. "We're nearly twenty-eight, Emmy. Is it always going to hurt this much?"

"I'm afraid so." Emmeldra slid her arms back around him again and bowed her head to rest on his shoulder, blood-red hair mingling with blood-red hair. "We just have to do the best we can. You know that a full cycle has almost passed, and it's almost time for the next war with the Dark."

"Yes, I know." Hanir took her hand and rubbed it. "I am sorry that we couldn't share our Destinies as Mother did with her twin sister."

Emmeldra suppressed a shudder. Their mother's twin had fallen to the Dark. It was best not thought of. "We have to do the best we can," she said. "And I have to meditate more on the prophecy that was given to me, I think."

"Of course." Hanir kissed her hand and withdrew.

Left alone again, Emmeldra closed her eyes and sighed. She had much to do and little time left to do it in. Soon, her betrothed would arrive, and she was uncertain whether she would like him. Her mother hadn't had a happy marriage, and she'd had a similar Destiny and prophecy, despite being an Azure mage. She had married for the sake of generations yet unborn and given birth to children whom she had, luckily, loved, as well as a new future for her country.

Emmeldra sank down on the cushions in the center of the room and held out her hands. Soon enough, she felt the pressure of light talons on her wrist and knew that Speretha had arrived. The falcon spirit made a high screeching sound, asking her what she wanted.

"Guide me," she whispered. "I must learn the meaning of my Prophecy, for the Dark attacks have begun. I can feel the wings of Destiny stretching out. I must ride the Cycle, as it turns again."

The falcon cried out again, and then the words that Emmeldra had never been able to forget since she heard the priestess speak them wheeled into her head. She whispered them aloud.

*"Where the seagulls wheel,
There below the sounding stone
Waits the green-eyed destiny,
And you must come to this alone.
Where the ravens flap and cry,
Alone you will stand, between sea and sky,*

*And the Light will flare in the white fire,
And then you shall come to the end of desire."*

The falcon cried a third time, and then Emmeldra felt its talons leave her wrist. She opened her eyes and stared into the distance at the shifting fire that covered everything. She was a Scarlet mage, and if she looked hard enough, the veils of Time would part for her. Time was a lesser element and one that parted before the gaze of one who was Scarlet.

She wheeled and tipped, and then she was flying herself. She found herself staring at a strange scene, one that didn't seem connected to her prophecy. She saw a hill covered with red grass.

No, not red grass. Even as she watched, the grass appeared to blossom, and then there were yellow flowers, and then they were flames.

She saw her brothers standing in the middle of the flames, staring at them, their eyes wide and innocent in the way that they had looked as children. Hanir put out a hand, and the fire burned through him and swallowed him up.

"No!" Emmeldra cried.

Leroth stretched out a hand, too, but the flames swayed back from him as though pushed by his Gust magic. He flinched, looking hurt, and then turned in Emmeldra's direction.

"I can't touch them, Emmy," he said. "Why won't they let me touch them?"

"Don't call me Emmy."

He reached out again, and then he, too, was gone, vanishing in a sudden flash of fire as hot as lightning. Emmeldra sobbed, her head buried in her hands, and in that way became aware that she had a body again.

A soft screech made her look up. The falcon hovered in front of her, silvery and almost transparent, and she knew it had flown a long way. She smiled a little and put up a hand. Really, falcon spirits were supposed to come to Gust mages, but she was marked out by Destiny to difference and always had been.

"You found the place?" she whispered.

The falcon settled on her wrist again, and an image appeared in her mind. It was a great cliff, looming over what must be the Lilitha Ocean, given the silver touch to the foam of its waves. But she had never seen this place before, even though their castle overlooked the Ocean. She stared, watching the seagulls wheel, and then saw the dark cave opening on the side and gasped. Yes, that was a place below the sounding stone.

"Where the seagulls wheel," she whispered. "The first part. Thank you, Speretha."

The falcon preened as she spoke its truenam e and then vanished into air like the Gust spirit it was. Emmeldra stood, stretched, and went to the window that overlooked the courtyard. Perhaps she would see her betrothed arriving.

Sure enough, her betrothed's train had just entered the courtyard. Emmeldra braced herself, watching the glittering caparisons of the horses, and the flash of silver from the saddles, and the bright clothes of the riders. Soon, she would see him, and she feared she would see the flash of Dark in his eyes. There was always the possibility that he would go over to the Dark, just as her father had done. Or Mother's betrothed, as she preferred to think of him. She didn't like to think of being sired by someone who was of the Dark. How could the Dark have sired the Light that shone in her and in Leroth and in Hanir?

Then she saw him.

He rode in the center of the train, of course, for better protection from all the Dark attacks

that had been happening. His clothes enwrapped him: gleaming green silk tunic, hosen of the same color but a few shades darker, and a sword at his side that he wore almost casually. The sword had a silver hilt and a silver scabbard, and a glow of Destiny about it that shone with the fine blue-white fire of a diamond. Her betrothed's hair fell to his shoulders in a shower of silver-platinum curls, and he had green eyes that Emmeldra could see, even from this distance, as they rose to her face.

Their eyes met, and Emmeldra felt a blush warm her cheeks as she stared at him, her heart thundering in her breast. For a moment, they hovered together in their own world, and she heard the tap of hooves and the sound of harps ringing out a welcome song—even her own fears of her Destiny—as distractions.

He was of the Light.

Emmeldra closed her gold-flecked eyes in wonder as he rode out of sight. Of course he was of the Light. Why wouldn't he be? He was Doralissan, of the Kingdom most ancient in the Light, strongest in the war with the Dark.

And she had seen the spirit in his eyes, and she knew—she just knew—that she could be in love with him.

She went downstairs with a light step and caught up with him just before he could enter the stables. He was waiting for her, and he turned and met her gaze again as she walked up to him.

Green eyes locked with gold-flecked green. Emmeldra held out her hands, and she felt him take them. But she couldn't look down and admire how perfectly their hands fit together. She couldn't take her eyes from that intense forest gaze, and the admiration she could see building in it.

He was of the Light.

His Destiny was as bright as the sword at his side.

"What is your name?" she whispered, though of course she knew.

"Lightflower," he said, and his voice whispered across her ears and sealed her heart to his.

"And you are Emmeldra."

She nodded and stepped forward, and their lips met in a perfect kiss.

Chapter Two

Masks

"No one is ordinary."

—Attributed to Klessa of the Nine Wonders, lecturing school-children.

Pheron shook his head in wonder as he watched his sister kiss her betrothed. Somehow, he had survived the journey with Prince Lightflower, gritting his teeth every time the prince did something handsome and noble and perfect, and yet he had never seen just how cloying the man was.

It was worse now that Lightflower was with Emmeldra, his betrothed.

It was so much worse, in fact, that Pheron turned and left the escort. His horse stood among the others, forlorn, but only for a little while. Soon enough Lightflower and Emmeldra would leave off their kiss and go into the castle to have some privacy, and then the gaping grooms would attend to the horses.

Pheron's stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten all day. When he wasn't riding at Lightflower's side as an honorary guard, he had roamed the countryside around the train, searching for some sign of the Dark attackers they all knew were nearby. All that left little time for breakfast. Pheron turned his steps toward the kitchen.

He ducked through the door and under the raised arm of one of the men who were trying to keep dogs out of the roasted meat. The dogs were cowering from his harsh voice, but it would take more than that to stop Pheron, and he was able to snatch a piece of the roasting meat and duck out again before the cook could do more than glare at him.

"That's for the feast tonight," the man called. His voice wavered.

Pheron turned and looked back at him to see if the cook would challenge him, but he must have thought better of challenging a prince of the blood of Aneron. Or he might have recognized Pheron's ready stance. Pheron had fought and beaten more than half the servants at the palace at one time or another.

"If I eat now, then I won't have to be at the feast," said Pheron, and bit into the meat. Not his favorite—genel, a cousin of the deer, and too gamy to be much good—but it was food, and that was what mattered. "You won't have to deal with me then. Count your rewards."

The man glared at him but turned and went back inside. Pheron shrugged and climbed the servants' stair that wound its way around the outside of the tower toward his room, munching all the way. Halfway up, he had to stop and have a coughing fit.

At last he reached his room. There was a tricky bit where he had to choose between juggling the genel and moving the stones aside to enter. He finally held the meat in his teeth and shoved the stones inward. They fell with a great clatter, and Pheron glanced down.

He needn't have worried. They were all much too occupied with Prince Lightflower's arrival. No one would look up—not that many of them ever did, anyway. Pheron snorted and climbed through the gap, pausing to let his eyes adjust from the brilliant light to the relative darkness inside the tower.

Much brighter than it would be when he had sealed the gap again, of course. He had bricked up other holes, and thin swatches of light shone through them. But, for the moment, the sun rushed in through this one, and illuminated the dust on the floor and the large crates piled everywhere.

Pheron pulled the meat from his mouth and went back to munching, even before he sat on the floor and leaned his back against one of the crates. Already his stomach had settled. He wanted a nap next.

But he couldn't rest yet. He had things to think about and put into their proper places in his mind so he didn't scream aloud.

"Prince Lightflower," he said aloud.

So. The Kingdom of Doralissa was reaching out to ally with his brother and sister and send them their promised betrothed prince and princess. That meant that the Princess Joydancer would be arriving soon. Pheron snorted.

"I can hardly wait," he said. "Four of them, looking into each other's eyes and so much in love they trip over their own feet."

Except that they wouldn't, of course. They would all walk as if they were dancing, even on one of the few nights when his mother didn't plan an entertainment to celebrate their betrothal.

"Things just got a lot worse," Pheron said, though even he couldn't have understood himself, since his mouth was full of genel. But that was all right. It wasn't as though he didn't know what he was talking about. "Emmeldra and Hanir I can bear. They at least know the way things work, and they've given up on me. But this Joydancer has a reputation for reforming Darkworkers, and Lightflower's not much better. He talked an assassin down on the road. For my sake." He finished the last of the genel and sucked juice from his fingers. "They'll want to take me on as a pet project, the last thing that *I* want—"

A scuttling sound interrupted him. Pheron rolled his eyes and picked up a chair leg that lay on top of the crate. The ongoing war with the Damned Spider that lived in the tower was about to enter another skirmish.

The Damned Spider lowered itself slowly into view, swinging from one strand of a glistening web. Pheron had never seen the full web; it was lost somewhere up in the heights of the tower, where he couldn't climb without risking a broken neck.

Besides, if he did manage to climb that high, he'd get stuck in it. Given the size of the Damned Spider, Pheron imagined the strands were more than strong enough to hold him. The spider's body was four hand-lengths across, a shiny purple that looked like the armsmaster's face on a hot afternoon. Its legs hung beneath its body, black and thin and strong. Eight eyes stared at him. They were gleaming and unafraid even in the sunlight. At least, Pheron assumed they were unafraid. Who knew if spiders felt fear?

The Damned Spider didn't seem to. It had the peculiar notion that the tower was its territory, and that meant that it continually descended to harass Pheron. He hadn't managed to break it of the habit yet.

Pheron threw the chair leg.

The Damned Spider dropped from the thread, letting the chair leg go overhead, and scuttled toward him across the floor, legs clacking and rubbing.

Pheron drew the knife from his belt and lashed out, twisting his body to the side to avoid the reach of the pincers. The Damned Spider leapt aside from the strike, quick as a hunting cat, then jumped up on one of the crates and leaped again, this time straight at him.

Pheron rolled behind the crate and heard the spider smash into it. The impact sent the crate shuddering into his side, bruising his ribs and almost driving the breath from him. Had it been any spider other than the Damned Spider, Pheron might have hoped that the crash would have killed it, bursting that huge body like an overripe fruit, but he knew better than to hope for that.

He looked over the crate.

Eight eyes met his own gaze.

Pheron tossed his knife.

To his own enormous surprise, he scored a hit, the first he'd had in two months, when he had succeeded in chopping halfway through a leg. The Damned Spider staggered backward, liquid bubbling from one of its eyes, and then it turned and tossed a silken thread up into the darkness. In seconds it had ascended out of sight.

Pheron knelt there, panting for a moment, staring up at the ceiling. No, the Damned Spider must have retreated to nurse its wound.

A little surprising. Pheron shrugged and retired to his pallet. Perhaps the extra training his mother had insisted he undergo, mainly to look decorative when he helped to escort Prince

Lightflower back to Orlath, had paid off after all.

He could always hope.

It had been a good afternoon, if disconcerting, and Pheron found he didn't want to remain awake and brood on it. He rolled over and closed his eyes. He'd always had the talent to fall asleep quickly, and in seconds had descended into a darkness that was the twin of the Damned Spider's.

* * *

"Pheron."

Pheron yawned and blinked awake, rubbing a hand over his face. The fading wisps of a dream danced in his head. He ignored them. Sometimes, just as with the magic that allowed him to conjure a clay ball, prophetic dreams tried to show up in his brain in a crippled mimicry of the way that they came to his sister and brothers and mother. They never succeeded in manifesting fully, though, and Pheron never remembered more than a few broken fragments. This suited him.

"Pheron!"

Pheron rolled his eyes. His mother was getting impatient. And of course they couldn't have that, no, of course not, not Queen Annilda getting impatient. It would break the show she wanted to put on for Prince Lightflower.

Pheron arranged his face in his own pleasant mask and made his way toward the gap in the tower wall. A movement off to the side caught his attention, though, and he turned his head, ignoring his mother as she called again from the courtyard beneath.

The Damned Spider stood there, watching him. Then it turned and swung back up into the darkness.

It had left something behind on the floor.

"Pheron!"

Pheron went over to the thing, poking it with one foot. It was something silk-wrapped, and quite large. From the shape, it might have been a cat. He looked up into the darkness, half-expecting a sign of what it meant, but nothing happened. The Damned Spider had apparently gone back to its web.

"Pheron!"

It was time to go down. Pheron had no idea what the silk-wrapped package might have meant, though, and he resolved to find out. He turned and descended from the tower, beating the dust from his clothes as best he could.

"I told you not to go in there."

"I know, Your Majesty," said Pheron and stepped off the bottom of the stairs before he looked up and met his mother's eyes.

She shook her head at him. She had silver-blue eyes that glinted and shifted colors, and long golden hair, and a firm grip as she tried to catch his wrist and haul him into the feast. Pheron avoided the grip without alerting her that he was doing it.

Annilda glared at him again. "You are such a child," she said. "You know nothing of true compassion or respect for others. You know nothing of the Light, and I am ashamed that I bore you."

Pheron nodded. It was the third speech she gave him on the subject, and she rotated it in and out among the others. "I know," he said.

"You're being contrary," she said. "Do you realize, Pheron, that a war is happening outside these walls, and that it is the time of your brother's and sister's weddings? The Dark is ascending. This is not the time for petty quarrels."

"We both know that."

Annilda frowned at him then shook her head, as much to say that she knew he didn't mean what he said but didn't have the time to puzzle it out. "You are a child," she said. "And you have no respect for the true emotions of others. Your sister has begun her Destiny tonight, and a great and tragic thing it will be."

It was so strange, Pheron thought, that she spoke those words with a shine like suns in her eyes.

"Come in," she said. "And remember that you are a prince of the blood."

Pheron rolled his eyes as he followed her in. Of course, it pleased her to remind him of that when she wanted something from him, just as it pleased her to tell him he acted like a child even though she had never treated him as anything else. Twenty-four years gone by, and she still saw him as the son the priestesses of Elle had placed in her arms without a Destiny.

Pheron had forgiven himself long ago for that. It wasn't as though he had any choice in the matter. He wished that she would do the same.

They entered the hall, and Annilda seemed to transform. She picked up the cup that had been waiting at the head of the long table and all but trilled, "To my daughter and her new husband-to-be!"

The guests chorused and drank. Pheron looked around in interest. There *were* a lot of guests. The long tables that usually leaned against the walls in the kitchen or the guardroom had been placed end to end, and the people drinking from the gold-wrought cups all looked noble-born. They must have come in during the last few days while he was riding with Lightflower.

The light glittered and flashed off the cups and swords set with jewels and proud, ancient runes and faces so noble that they made Pheron's teeth ache. Self-satisfaction glinted in the light of the floating elf-globes, and Destiny that shone like a corona around everyone but him.

Emmeldra and Lightflower were at the other end of the table, just visible, though of course Pheron could see the flame of his sister's hair. He knew Emmeldra was blushing, not because he could see her but because that was what she would do. Lightflower would hold her hand and gazed into her eyes. After seeing him charm a wild hawk from the sky and stop the stoning of a woman who had urinated in the local village's temple font with just his tears, Pheron had no doubt of that.

Hanir stood beaming on the left side of the table, halfway between his mother and twin sister. Leroth was halfway down on the right side, haunted and tragic and staring into his cup with an expression of perfect agony on his face.

Pheron grabbed his own cup and took a deep, deep draught, glad the wine was sweet but wishing it was stronger.

A *long* night. His mask was going to hurt by the time all this was done.

Chapter Three

The Mask of Agony

“He who lives by any other law than the Cycle’s will never be happy. He will have a craving in his heart to finish what is unfinished, to love what is unloved, to know what is unknown. And because only the Cycle completes, only the Cycle teaches us the mysteries of the heart, only the Cycle is the source of all wisdom, he will be miserable until he turns back to the simple circles and the simple truths that lie at the center of all things. What a price we pay when we try to live by our own wills!”

—From *The Book of the Cycle for Young Readers*, Vol. Nine, Section Seven, Paragraph Three.

Leroth listened to the laughter echo around him and closed his eyes, fighting to still the nausea rising in his throat.

They laughed.

Didn’t they know what they faced? Didn’t they know that the Dark was coming and that soon it would crash over them all in never-ending waves, burying them forever, unless he could face his Destiny and stop it?

No, Leroth thought as he shoved himself to his feet. He supposed that they didn’t think about things like that. They weren’t the ones who had to bear the burdens and know the terrible cost of facing the Dark one day. Tears that he couldn’t hold back burned behind his shut lids, tears of pity and compassion as he thought of all the unborn lives that would be destroyed if he refused his duty and the life that would be destroyed if he did not.

“Leroth.”

Leroth opened his eyes and turned his head, meeting his mother’s gaze. She smiled at him, but it was a small thing, and she lifted her free hand—the other still gripped a flagon of wine—to touch his shoulder, as if she hoped that that would reassure him.

“Do you need to rest?” she whispered. “The celebration will still be here in an hour, if you want to come back.”

“I have to leave, Mother,” said Leroth and saw her flinch from the depth of emotion in his voice. She sighed, and her eyes shifted to the color of storm-tossed clouds on a windy day.

“Your sister would prefer it were you here,” she said and nodded to the head of the table again. Leroth looked that way, taking in the sight of Emmeldra drinking from the same cup as her betrothed, smiling into his eyes. It would have made a tempting sight were he in the mood for joy. But he was in the mood for melancholy and had been for a long while now. If the nobles would smile and sip wine in their fine houses, someone had to remember what the Dark was doing to the land and whose cost it would be to save it.

“Give her my regrets,” he murmured and then fled the hall before his tears overwhelmed him.

He halted out of sight of the hall, choking back the sobs. So much death, so many tales of destruction and war. The soft, silvery light of the elf-globes couldn’t comfort him now. And why should it comfort anyone, when the kingdom of Orlath would soon face its deadliest enemy? He was convinced that he could see the hidden desperation on the faces of all Orlath’s nobles if he just looked long enough. They held their feasts and betrothals in an effort to stave off the

Dark. Of course, Emmeldra's betrothal was important in the working out of her Destiny, but the feast...they didn't need that. They could have done something more important and worthwhile, like praying.

Leroth nodded. Yes, that was where he wanted to go. The goddess Elle felt pain just as he did, as she watched the suffering of her children. She would comfort him on this night when no mortal hand could.

He set off, walking with what he knew was swift grace. He didn't dance as his elder brother and sister did. Instead, he stalked like a hunting cat. He was a fighter, and the sword, Acandra the Cleaver, that hung at his side proved it. It shone with its jewels and its Destiny, but the light was sober, not like the maniacally cheerful gleam of the elf-globes in the great hall. Leroth knew it would be a comfort when he faced the Dark and his inevitable doom.

He reached the temple at last, stepping through the cool white doors and into the main chamber. Here, no elf-globes hovered. Instead, a white radiance shone ever from the marble statue of the goddess herself, hands outstretched to the mortals before her, a crescent moon on her breast and flowers at her feet. But her face was set in the mask of agony that Leroth had come to see her for.

Leroth sank to his knees and bowed his head. For a long moment, he felt nothing but peace.

"Elle," he murmured. "She of the Crops, Lady of the Scarlet, Gentle Mother of the Azure, Bright Spirit of the Gust." He named his own element last on purpose, raising a hand so that a small wind blew through the room in homage to the goddess. "I come to ask you a question. How shall I bear the suffering that the Dark brings to the land? Each blow that falls is like a hammer on my heart, and those of lesser compassion ignore it and laugh, in fear for their own lives. Tell me how to bear it, for you must know what it is like to hear others laugh and ignore the things that you cherish." He called the Gust again and let it flicker up and down his arms in pale fire. "How shall I bear my Destiny?"

There was no answer right away, but Leroth bowed his head and waited. After all, Elle was not compelled to answer mortals. She would do things obliquely, but always in the right way, showing the true path through the tangled roads of Destiny. Everything that happened in Orlath happened at her will.

Leroth sighed as the thoughts passed through his head, falling back into the gentle catechism of his days in the priestesses' instruction. There was nothing wrong with that. It brought back memories of happier times before that day ten years ago when he had realized just what his Destiny was.

He would have to save the world. He would have to make sacrifices. And he would have to do it for people so determined to ignore the Dark that they took no measures to save themselves.

A wind stirred his hair. At once, Leroth stopped his melancholy thoughts and opened his eyes again, staring around.

The moonlight that shone in through the open door of the temple seemed to provide the only movement at first, flickering patterns of brilliance and shadows as clouds chased themselves across the Fair One's face. But then the movement came again, and Leroth saw a single white feather lying on the temple floor just within the massive doors. He went to it and picked it up, smoothing the soft edges with a finger. He already knew what it was.

A seagull feather.

He faced the statue of Elle and knelt with reverence again. "My answer lies in the Azure," he said softly. "I will go there and ask the Lilitha for help. My thanks, my gracious lady."

Leroth turned and left the temple, hurrying past the font and turning right. He could hear the grumble of the sea. In truth, he could always hear it, but he had trained himself to ignore it, since he had weightier matters to deal with. Now, though, he concentrated on it and closed his eyes, sending forth a wind to ride the ocean and tell him what rode upon her.

A little fishing boat bobbed on the moon-silvered waves, the sailors risking the potential danger of a sudden summer squall to catch the *lyanda* fish that rose only by the light of the full moon. There was a shark swimming close to the boat, perhaps attracted by the swarming *lyanda* fish as well. A leaping pod of dolphins, heading out to sea and away from the shark. A flock of sleeping gulls. And then...

Leroth caught his breath. There was the answer to his prayer, the sign that Elle had sent to guide him to his true Destiny.

Rising from the waves was a glorious, dark-skinned mermaid, her green hair coiling around her shoulders. She had a comb in her hand. The comb, which might have been whalebone, shone the same pure white color as the feather that Leroth had found in the goddess's sanctuary, the same color as the light that came from the statue of Elle herself. Could there be any clearer sign?

The wind told him that the mermaid was making for shore. Leroth called his magic back to him and hurried forward again. He knew where the mermaid would come to the beach, and he knew that he had to be there for the meeting with her.

Even as he realized that it would bring him more agony.

* * *

Leroth stepped from the edge of the small path that wound down the cliff and walked out onto the sandy little curve of beach. It was one of the few coves outside the small bay itself. Cliffs loomed almost all the way around the castle of Orlath, breaking at the bay, in a nook that Leroth had discovered as a small boy, and...

Here.

It shone with magic in the moonlight, and if Leroth didn't turn his head too fast, he could catch in odd places the silver glint that meant unfulfilled Destiny was hanging heavy in the air. He walked toward the waves and stood there, waiting to see with his own eyes the weedy head of the mermaid.

She rose.

Her skin gleamed like underwater depths, that glossy color on the edge between green and black. Her hair spilled down her back in a trail of brighter color, the green that shone on the edges of the waves on a warm summer night. She had large blue eyes, and they glinted as she turned them toward the shore, floating just far enough above the waves that Leroth could see the silvery-green beginning of her tail but nothing else.

This, then, was part of his Destiny.

Their eyes met, and Leroth bowed his head. Love at first sight thundered through him and filled him, and he knew that it could never be. She was of the ocean, and he was of the land, and she was immortal, and he was not. She had a separate Destiny from his own.

All the doom and gloom of the Destiny he had been born with filled him, and he fell on his knees at the edge of the beach, sobbing aloud. The Destiny hung heavier in the air, and he could all but smell the metallic scent of it.

He heard the soft, hesitant splashes as she swam toward him. She may have felt the

touch of love, too, but she probably didn't know what it meant. The way that they thought about Destiny under the ocean was different from the way that they thought about it in Orlath. Leroth knew that and knew that he would have the tormenting delight of trying to explain it to her.

Her hand reached out and brushed his cheek. Even that shot a trail of colored fire along his nerves, and he reached up, clasping her fingers, kissing the knuckles with soft reverence. He loved her because she was fair, and it was fated. They could hover on the edge of desire but never do anything else.

She said something he didn't understand, all rocking waves and hisses of weeds against foam. Leroth looked at her and saw the great double-fin of her tail as she flipped it up, treading water so she didn't become beached. Her other hand clutched the comb, and she looked so helplessly lovely that his heart caught all over again and he began to sob.

The mermaid leaned toward him, eyes fixed on him. Those eyes were all Leroth could see. They were his world. She was going to kiss him, he realized, even though she could never have heard of the gesture before. This was fate, too. Fate would grant them one taste of each other, and then they would be snatched away.

Leroth kissed her with all his soul. He loved her, even though they could never be together. He would never love another woman. He would die whispering her name.

"Elle curse it!"

Leroth's eyes flared open, and he almost felt the shards of the broken Destiny pierce him. The mermaid gave a tiny cry of shock, and she dived again, the flip of her tail and hair the last things he saw before she was gone.

Leroth stood up and pulled Acandra. This was the first of a very few tender moments with his love. How dare someone interrupt it?

"Ouch."

Leroth walked toward the voice, thinking he knew it, although it would take him a few moments to place it. He rounded a bend in the cliff that went along the beach and saw a man sitting on the sand, rubbing at an ankle that he might have twisted.

The man looked up at him, and even in the tricky moonlight he was recognizable, by the utter ordinariness of his face and the lack of any Destiny whatsoever. Pheron. The brother whose existence Leroth managed to forget all about sometimes, until something like this happened to remind him.

"Prince Leroth," said Pheron, sounding relieved. "Can you help me? I tripped, and I don't think that I can—"

Leroth lifted his sword and charged.

Even through the rage, part of him took some satisfaction. He would be a fratricide.

It was all part of the ongoing tragedy that was his life.

Chapter Four

Wounds

“You can’t say that everything possible has happened until the world has ended. And even then, there might be a new world. You never know.”

—Attributed to Klessa of the Nine Wonders, just before she was condemned to death for blasphemy.

Pheron stared at his charging brother. Perhaps Leroth hadn’t left the feast out of disgust, after all, and perhaps it hadn’t been wise to follow him.

He didn’t think he could roll out of the way, not with his twisted ankle, so he flung an arm over his face in case Leroth was going to hack off his head, calling and throwing a tiny ball of clay with the other hand.

Leroth let out a cry of rage. Pheron began to scramble backward. Perhaps the clay’s distraction would give Leroth a moment to calm down, and then that would mean that Pheron could get away...

Pain.

Pheron had never known that something so pure could exist. For a long moment, he wasn’t conscious of anything else, even shock. He looked at the wound in his right arm, the result of Acandra’s blade, and felt nothing else.

Then there was shock.

And agony.

Leroth stood back from him, panting. Pheron stared up at him and tried to say something. But what came from his mouth was a scream instead.

He rolled over, clutching the wound. He didn’t care if Leroth took the opportunity to bash his head in. If it would stop the pain, then Pheron might even welcome it.

“I had to,” he heard Leroth say somewhere behind the ringing in his ears. “You interrupted my moment with my lady, and it’s not as though I’m going to have many of them.” His voice sounded muffled at the end. Pheron didn’t know if he had trailed off in embarrassment or if the ringing and the pounding of his own heart was just getting too strong.

The spurts of blood forced themselves out against his pressing hand. He would have to have help.

“Prince Leroth,” Pheron began, remembering the title even in his haze. He never addressed any of the royals without one. “Could you help me up?”

No answer came, and then another burst of pain overwhelmed him. Pheron clenched his teeth so hard he bit his tongue. No, he couldn’t pass out. He couldn’t. The ferocity of the blood’s spurting meant that he would die if he did. He had to keep his hand planted there.

He staggered to one knee and then tried to get to his feet. His sprained ankle reminded him with another twinge that it was still hurt. He tumbled back to the sand and lifted his head, looking down the beach. Perhaps Leroth could be summoned back with a scream.

The beach was empty.

Pheron took a deep breath and began to crawl.

It hurt. The beach sand gritted on his legs, and now and then a sharp scrap of stone or

shell threatened to cut through the dress trousers he wore. Once something nibbled at his toes, but when Pheron kicked back, he didn't hit anything. Then, of course, he unbalanced and fell heavily into the sand. Blackness did take him then, and when he opened his eyes again, the weakness and dizziness had increased.

The path up the cliff looked far away. And he couldn't climb back up the cliff face itself.

Pheron wasn't sure what made him dig in with his good knee and foot and keep shoving himself along. Perhaps just native stubbornness. He had always been contrary, his mother said. He was probably being contrary again.

Sand. Pain. More sand. More pain. It went on and on, and Pheron got more irritated than ever.

Perhaps he was going to die. At least he shouldn't die on this beach.

Besides, he didn't want to die. He didn't want to give Leroth the satisfaction. A blow his brother had struck, not even intending to kill him perhaps, and all for a petty reason.

Something uncoiled in him as he thought about it, something hot and dark as bitter wine.

The hot dark thing kept him moving, taunting him whenever he stopped with images of Leroth's blank face. It wasn't that Pheron thought his brother would gloat over his death. More likely, Leroth wouldn't even remember striking the blow for a moment, and then he would burst into tears and use Pheron's death as an excuse for more mourning and bemoaning of his own fate.

That wouldn't do.

I am not going to die.

By the time he reached the foot of the path, Pheron had taken to whispering the words over and over, irrespective of the breath it took. He braced himself on a rock and stared up the path. He couldn't make it.

He was going to die here at the bottom, after all.

No.

Pheron gritted his teeth and stood up. His ankle shot hot bolts of pain up his leg, telling him this was not a good idea. Pheron ignored it. After all, if he was dying anyway, who cared what happened to his ankle?

It hurt less than his arm, so it was just going to have to cooperate. His thoughts were half-hysterical. He hopped forward and came down on his ankle, so that his breath was forced in a harsh puff through his nose.

The second step was better, and the third better still. The path wasn't all that steep, after all, though of course he wavered like a drunk as he climbed it. It had been meant to lead horses down and put them on ships, so it couldn't be that steep. He had to make it, and he would. A human walking beside a horse could make it. He could.

He stopped halfway up, wavering, and turned back to stare down at the ocean. He didn't see anything that looked like the weedy head of Leroth's mermaid love. Too bad. He would have liked to chuck a rock at her.

Pheron blinked, somewhat startled by the thought.

The hot dark thing in him laughed and then urged him to turn back and hop up the path. A little further, a little further, and then he could stumble into the courtyard and collapse. Someone was sure to notice him.

Would they?

The nobles were still all at the feast. He and Leroth were the only ones who had left. It had increased his hope that he might have something to say to his brother. And all the servants

would be eating the leftovers and sighing over the beauty of the betrothed couple, no doubt. His tower.

Pheron turned and limped and stumbled and hopped toward the stairs. He would die, he knew that, but at least he wouldn't provide an excuse for Leroth to wring his hands and weep and everyone else to cluck. He would die in private.

It occurred to him, halfway up the stairs, that something was wrong with his arm. Of course, the pain still radiated everywhere, but there was something else wrong with it. Something about the weight was wrong. Pheron turned and looked at it. It just hung there.

He took a deep breath and moved his other hand away from clutching at the wound.

Blood flew forth again, and his right arm, below the elbow, fell to the tower stairs.

Pheron closed his eyes. He would have liked Leroth to see that...

No, he wouldn't. Leroth would have wailed about the tragedy that was his life, as he was so wont to do, and then the others would pat him on the back and tell him not to worry, that he still had the Dark to fight and redeem himself.

Pheron didn't want to be anyone's excuse. He turned and hopped the rest of the way up to the tower.

By the time he got there, his vision had fuzzed with gray, and he was glad that he hadn't put the stones back into the gap when his mother called him to the feast. He fell into the room where he slept and lay there on the floor for a moment, bleeding, one-armed, and glad.

He had made it off the beach.

He had done one last thing that meant he wouldn't have to see the expressions on the faces of his family. It might be some time before anyone found his body. They didn't know where he slept.

They didn't know he slept anywhere at all.

Pheron yawned and closed his eyes. He couldn't find the strength to be bitter about that. He probably should get to his pallet, but this was far enough. No one could see his feet from the courtyard.

A scuttling sound made him look one last time. The Damned Spider hung from a thread not far away, staring at him with seven intact eyes and one bleeding one. Pheron shook his head and closed his eyes again.

"Eat me," he muttered. "I suppose you will. At least that way, no one will know what happened to me."

He dropped into darkness, sudden and final and complete, as the scuttling sound approached him.

Chapter Five

Wounds to the Enemy

"He who does not know the truth of his own heart will soon find those who will remind him. After all, none are so vulnerable as the innocent. But doze, and then you will awaken to find yourself a prisoner."

—*From The Teachings of the Cycle.*

No one understood.

Oh, they tried, thought Hanir as he watched his sister dance with her betrothed, smiling into his eyes as they swept gracefully around the floor. They even thought they *did* understand him. Hanir had heard his mother more than once, when Annilda didn't know that he was listening, comment that Hanir was the simplest of her children, the clearest, like his own flame.

But none of them knew his true depth, and Hanir didn't feel that he could share it with them. He knew the Dark. He knew true evil, and he tried to fight in all the places it flourished. But they just admired whatever he did and looked at him with glowing eyes and then walked away. They never understood that they needed to carry the war to the Dark at once, which was the message that Hanir meant to convey with his destruction of the small Dark things.

And now, with the death of his best friend...

Hanir fought to keep the rage from showing on his face. They all smiled and laughed and waltzed around, as if they could forget!

Of course, he didn't blame his twin. Emmeldra couldn't help but look radiant in the arms of her betrothed and Destined love. And she was doing her part in the war against the Dark. Every day, Hanir knew, she discovered new magic. Couldn't she call a Gust spirit, even though she was a Scarlet mage?

It was the others he blamed.

Shallow fools, all of them. They wouldn't know true depth if they drowned in it. Hanir turned back to the table and stared into his wine, clenching his fist on the stem of his goblet. War was the Destiny of the blood of Queen Aneron and of all the kingdom. And who would the first traitor be?

Hanir lifted his eyes and let them sweep over the faces in the hall. Lord Quillon, nodding and talking with the Lady Anjoa, looked back at him, and for a moment Hanir saw terrible guilt in his face. Then he turned to the lady, mumbled some excuse, and all but fled the hall.

Hanir stood and followed him, not caring if he looked casual to the celebrants in the hall or not. This was serious business. His hand went to the hilt of his sword, Ulua the Gleamer, and he drew it, calling fire. It glittered red and yellow along the edges of the sword as he emerged into the courtyard.

Lord Quillon was running toward the stables. He stopped at Hanir's shout, though, and turned around, trying to pretend that nothing was wrong.

"My Lord Prince," he said. "Quite a pleasant night." He nodded to the full moon, which had just gone behind a cloud. "I thought that I needed to leave the hall...fresh air, pleasant wind..."

"Draw," said Hanir and again stepped forward.

The man's face went as white as his hair. "I...Prince Hanir, why would you accuse me? What have I done to you that you want to challenge me to a duel?"

"Not a duel," said Hanir. "An execution. You are a traitor, my lord, and you would go to the Dark if you had the chance. I know that you were going to get on a horse and ride to your lords in order to tell them all about Prince Lightflower and the Princess Emmeldra uniting. Draw your sword. You do deserve the chance to fight for your life, though you won't win."

"I am not a traitor." Lord Quillon stood straight now, and Hanir had to admit he could look impressive when he wanted to. "I am an honorable man, and I am loyal to the Light, the Kingdom of Orlath, and the blood of Queen Aneron."

Hanir peered at him. Could he be right? Could Hanir's magic have been wrong? Perhaps

his own uneasiness about the presence of the traitors in the castle—and there had to be some—had marked out the wrong man.

“He attacked me!”

Hanir turned to face the woman stepping out of the darkness. She was slender, young, with long dark hair that tumbled down her back almost to her waist and curled about her sweet face. Right now, her wide, doe-like golden eyes were glimmering with tears. She turned and looked to Hanir, and for a moment her gaze appeared to flash red. Of course, that could have been a trick of the light.

“My lord,” she whispered. “Please help me. He attacked me and laughed when I refused him and told me that a country maiden’s virtue was no great prize. I followed him here and took a position in the castle, hoping against hope that my chance for justice would come. But I didn’t know that he was a traitor to the Light. I only knew that he was evil. Please. Will you kill him for me?”

“Of course he is evil,” said Hanir, convinced of it now. The girl’s voice rang with sincerity, and her eyes shone with the flash of outrage that an innocent maiden would use when speaking of her attacker. Everyone knew the country nobility were no better than the most common highwaymen sometimes and would as soon attack a girl with a touch of spirit as look at one. He turned to Quillon. “I shouldn’t even give you time to draw your sword, but I still will.”

“I don’t know who this girl is! I’ve never seen her before. Please, my lord, you have to believe me!”

“My name is Jienna,” said the girl. “And of course he would profess not to remember me. But I worked on his estate for years, and he attacked me.” She began to cry, petite sobs that didn’t affect the clarity of her voice. “I told him that I wished to save my body for the man I would marry, but he wouldn’t let me keep even that much, all the treasure I had in the world!”

Hanir looked at her as she wept. Her tears shone on her cheeks in the clear moonlight. Jienna turned her head and looked up at him, and for a moment her gaze reminded him of someone.

No, not her gaze. The way she held her head, the slant of her body...that reminded him of someone, but he could not say who. The memory faded like smoke even as he grasped at it and left the young girl whose only chance at justice he was.

Hanir stiffened his spine. “That is just what you would say if you were guilty and pleading for your life when you knew you didn’t deserve it,” he said as he turned back to Quillon.

“Or what I would say if I were innocent and pleading for my life!” said Quillon, a hint of impatience in his voice now.

Hanir heard it and went cold. He shook his head sharply. The man thought he was going to escape, and Hanir couldn’t allow that.

“Draw your sword.”

“I’m sixty,” said Quillon even as he drew his sword. “How am I supposed to defeat you? Elle, how am I supposed to have attacked her?”

Hanir was glad that the old dastard didn’t speak Jienna’s name, even though he nodded to her with the utmost contempt. He wasn’t worthy to speak the name of such a delicate creature.

“Let us begin,” he said and stalked in a graceful circle around the old man, who struck out at him with his sword.

Hanir shook his head. “Did you really think that you could defeat me, that the Dark would ever win against the Light?” he asked as he struck out himself and razed a line of blood down the noble’s side. The flames cauterized the wound in the same moment, and the courtyard filled with

the scent of burning flesh.

Quillon stumbled, clutching his wound, and gasped out, "I should have joined the Dark! I would have, did I know what madness the Light was prey to!"

That settled it. An innocent man would never say such a thing. Hanir knew he was able to finish him off now in whatever way was most fitting.

So he did what any true and noble lord should do to a traitor who had fallen to the Dark and cut off Quillon's head. It bounced a short distance away and landed, looking up with a surprised expression. Hanir picked it up and held it out to Jienna, who shrank back from it.

"He is dead, my lady," Hanir said. "He can never hurt you again."

Jienna averted her eyes. "I know," she murmured. "But it takes some getting used to. I didn't know that court was...so violent. And I'm not a lady, my lord. Just a kitchen servant."

"You are far more a lady than he was a lord," said Hanir, and, dropping the head, stepped toward her. His heart beat fast and hard. "I...this might seem an imposition, Lady Jienna, but would you mind if I called the Scarlet and subjected you to the Test of the Flame?"

Jienna blinked. "If you wish to, my lord, but I hardly think that you would find anything. After all, the priestesses of Elle tested me when I was born. I know that I don't have any magic or grand Destiny."

Hanir smiled at her as he held out a hand and called a flicker of the Scarlet, and turned it from true red to the deep blue needed for the Test of the Flame. "It will not hurt, my lady. And if it should find nothing, then of course it will do you no harm."

He thought that the Test would find something. No woman could be that gracious, that wonderful, that noble, without some trace of noble or even royal blood in her veins.

That must be the source of the familiar way she held her head and looked up at him, too. True blood would always come through, Hanir thought as he held up his hand in front of his eyes and looked at her through the clear glass of the flame.

Sure enough, it did. The blue glow left afterimages dancing across his eyes. Jienna was an Azure mage and a powerful one. It was amazing that the priestesses hadn't found her. Hanir's suspicions that they hadn't tested her grew. Of course, they sometimes didn't bother to test the village-born, thinking there was no magic among them anymore.

Hanir knew otherwise. Aneron had been a common village-born maiden, to judge from the portraits of her in the great hall, but she had founded the royal line of Orlath and turned back the Dark twice in her lifetime. Appearances weren't everything.

"You have Azure magic, my lady," he said, lowering the flame and letting it go out.

Jienna laughed, sounding nervous. "Really? Well, I have always been drawn to the sea. That explains it."

She wasn't that nervous, though, or she would have glanced away from him. Hanir took a step toward her and saw her almost sway back from him, her face falling and her head twisting.

"I'm sorry," he said with infinite gentleness, stopping his advance. "You were attacked. Of course you wouldn't trust men."

"It's not that," said Jienna. "I could never be nervous around you. I know you would never hurt anyone who wasn't part of the Dark." She turned back and smiled at him, and Hanir's heart sang and soared. "It's that...well, I am a kitchen maid, my lord, and you are a great prince. Of course, when I see that look in your eyes, I must assume that you would offer yourself to me out of pity." She straightened her spine and looked at him with pride in her eyes. "And I won't offer my body, even stained and soiled as it is, to someone who pities me."

"No," said Hanir, smitten and frustrated all at the same time by the sense that she

resembled someone he knew. "Of course not. I wouldn't expect you to. I am so charmed by you, my lady..." He shook his head and let the thoughts wander away, since he didn't want them coming out of his mouth tonight. Jienna's blush was already as intense as the flame. "You should, at the least, go the priestesses of Elle and get your Azure gift trained."

"Why should I?" asked Jienna. "They missed me once. I wouldn't trust them." She hesitated. "Would you train me?"

Hanir couldn't keep himself from smiling. "I cannot, being Scarlet, but I will find someone who can. Meet me back here at this hour tomorrow."

"I will," she said.

For a moment, Hanir thought she might just leave. But then, with a final glance at the headless corpse of Lord Quillon, she took a deer-quick step forward and kissed him, glancing the edge of his lips and almost getting a mouthful of his hair. She blushed and ran off into the darkness again, looking back over her shoulder. Hanir fancied he saw her eyes flash red again before she vanished.

He stood there savoring it for a moment and then turned and kicked at the dead man.

"Beheading was too good for you, attacking so sweet and good a creature," he said.

Then Hanir turned and went back to the feast to tell his mother that one of her chief councilors had been a traitor to the Dark. Despite everything, though, he was smiling. Perhaps he felt he had struck a real blow against the Dark.

Or maybe it was for another reason.

Chapter Six

Surprises

*"He who is not born with a Destiny will never understand the plight of those who are."
—Supposed mistranslation of the Last Proverb of Oren Kadhah.*

Pheron opened his eyes.

He stared into the corner of the tower for a moment, slowly focusing on the crates, his pallet, a broken chair-leg that might be a twin of the one he had hurled at the Damned Spider. He had to be alive, of course. Elle wouldn't make a heaven that looked like this. What would be the point?

He was filled with a horrible lassitude. When he tried to turn his head to look at his arm, he felt as though his skin had turned to lead. Weakness lay on top of him like a smothering blanket.

But he was alive.

Pheron was not sure why such joy surged through him at the thought. The stump of his right arm was covered with a gauzy bandage. Pheron blinked. Should he be happy that someone had found and seen to him in his weakened state? Apparently so, since whoever it was had to have tended him and made sure that he wouldn't die. At least he had cared enough to bring bandages.

If it was Leroth...

Pheron gritted his teeth and forced the thought away. He would have to thank his brother if Leroth had decided to try and make other people see how compassionate he was. Then he would try to strangle Leroth and put him out of his tragedy-ridden misery.

Or so the hot dark thing inside him, born on the beach, demanded.

No one else was in the tower, at least at first look. Pheron didn't let that bother him. The crates lay in tumbled piles, none the same size as another. There were a dozen places here large enough to hide a full-grown man. Leroth was probably staring out through a thin gap in the stones and meditating on his sad life.

"Leroth?" he called.

There came no answer or at least not an answer he had expected. A rustling, clicking sound announced the arrival of the Damned Spider. Pheron braced himself for a charge.

The spider halted and made some kind of graceful waving motion with its mandibles instead. Pheron took a step back. Perhaps it was waiting until he was dead, or perhaps his protector had already fought it to a standstill and it was now wary of approaching any closer.

The waving of the mandibles went on, though it didn't make any more sense no matter how long Pheron watched it. At last, one of the right legs poked sharply out to the side. Pheron followed it with his eyes. The Damned Spider almost seemed to be pointing at something, though what—

Oh.

His arm.

Pheron stared at the stump. The bandage wrapped around its end wasn't a crude layer of gauze after all. It was spidersilk, so tight that no blood could seep through. Pheron had never seen a wrapping so thick, even when the Damned Spider had killed prey almost too big for it. He wondered what it meant.

He was wondering what a lot of things meant suddenly.

He turned to look back at the Damned Spider. It stood there watching him with seven gleaming eyes. Then it turned, making Pheron flinch, and scuttled back into the darkness.

Pheron let out a noisy breath and looked back at his arm, lowering the stump until it rested on the floor.

Nothing happened. He did feel a distant twinge of pain, but nothing compared to the first effects of Acandra's bite that had so overwhelmed him...was it yesterday evening? He might have laid the wound into a pile of thick cloth for all the agony it gave him.

Pheron locked the stump in place and shoved himself to his feet. At once, he staggered. Catching himself on the wall, he looked down and grimaced. His sprained ankle had swollen and turned angry hues. He would have to get someone to look at it and soon. The Damned Spider, whatever it had done for his arm, could do nothing for that kind of wound.

He hadn't staggered only because of that, either. His stomach rumbled a warning of its own. He needed food.

He would have to face the kitchen staff.

Pheron grimaced again. But the same stubbornness that had made him drag himself across the beach and back to his tower still burned. It seemed that he wasn't going to die after all, though he was still weak. And if he had the strength to make it here when he thought every step might let him fall into darkness, then he would have the strength to let someone else see his arm and give him some food.

Surely.

Pheron took a deep breath and walked, leaning against the wall the entire way, to the gap in the stones. He kept all the crowding concerns about what he was going to do with one arm out of his mind. Many things would change, but right now he only wanted one thing to change, and that was the empty state of his stomach.

He started to step through the gap but froze as he heard the sudden, vivid clatter of hooves and surge of voices from below. He leaned against the wall and leaned over as far as he dared, watching the hunt ride out.

There was no doubt that it was a hunt. Both Prince Lightflower and the Princess Emmeldra were skilled at hunting, and Pheron was certain that they wanted to show each other their skills.

Yes, there they were, on a pair of matched white horses in the lead, beaming at each other so hard that Pheron thought he could smell the sap from here. Emmeldra laughed at something Lightflower had said, and the sound was audible, silver bells that made Pheron roll his eyes. Lightflower tossed his hair out of his own eyes, smiling, then put his head back and uttered a high-pitched, trilling call.

Wings flashed through the air like silver arrows, and a hawk dropped to Lightflower's uplifted arm. Emmeldra gasped in admiration. Lightflower said something else to her, and she shook her head but stopped her horse and gave the same cry. Pheron looked up, expecting to see another hawk descending or perhaps a falcon like the Gust spirit his sister made such a great deal out of being able to call.

Instead, there was a stir among the hounds the grooms had brought out, and one bounded over to sit at Emmeldra's feet, all but vibrating as it stared up at her. Sun flashed on the silver of its coat. Pheron shook his head. He had spent some time running with the hounds and had never seen that particular one before. Of course, Destiny would have created it especially for Emmeldra to be her faithful companion.

Destiny was so predictable.

Emmeldra laughed again and slid from her horse to embrace the hound. It barked and licked her cheek. Pheron nodded. Yes, even the bark was as close to Emmeldra's laughter as possible, and when the princess got back on her horse and rode out the gate, her laughter echoing behind her, the hound followed so close behind her horse that any normal dog would have gotten kicked. Lightflower followed her, his hawk still clinging to his arm. It didn't even spread its wings for balance. *Well, why should it? It's perfect.*

They are all perfect.

He watched them pass through the gate and turn for the Corlirin Plains beyond the castle. All the while, Emmeldra's laughter rang around them. It shouldn't have been audible that far away, but it still was. Pheron sighed.

"You'd think the laws of nature would be against Destiny once in a while," he muttered and then began the difficult process of negotiating the stairs.

He wasn't certain how servants, no doubt carrying full trays, had been expected to walk up these stairs in days when the blood of Queen Aneron had still lived in the tower. They had no railing on either side, and a good wind could drop someone whose arms were occupied. Pheron used his left arm for balance as much as possible and kept the stump tucked close to his side. He would hide it for as long as he could.

What am I so afraid of? He reached the bottom of the stair at last and walked toward the kitchens. *Compassion?*

Well, he knew the answer to *that*. Pity. If they would have looked at him with compassion,

that wouldn't have been so bad. But pity would tear and burn across his nerves. Pity was the kind of thing that Leroth excelled at showing. Pity was the kind of thing that all of them were so good at feeling.

Leroth stepped out of the kitchen door.

For a moment, Pheron felt as if he wanted to stand still, shrinking as his younger brother passed by. But then he shook his head and stood still. No, pity was one thing but fear another.

He didn't fear Leroth.

You hate him, suggested the dark, hot thing.

Pheron didn't have time to think about the implications of that thought before Leroth was on him. Pheron drew breath to greet his brother, to deal with a look of pity, to listen to yet another tragic story of Leroth's tragic life.

Leroth walked past without appearing to notice him.

Pheron turned his head and stared at his brother's back. Leroth wandered along, head bowed, now looking at the paving stones, now appearing so lost in a world of forlorn sighs that he probably had his eyes shut. Pheron wondered if Leroth could have the wits to be ashamed.

That suspicion lasted all of two seconds as he saw his brother kneel beside a sparrow that had hit the inner wall and begin to weep. In seconds, a crowd of servants gathered, murmuring comforting words as they patted Leroth on the head. His brother never let an opportunity pass to display his compassion if he could help it.

No. Leroth had not noticed him.

Pheron licked his lips. For a moment, he almost thought that a hawk had flown down and alighted on his shoulder as they were wont to do on Lightflower's. The prickle of talons was there or a sensation very like it. And the hot dark thing was back, whispering in his ear.

Make him notice you. You should.

Pheron took a deep breath and took a step toward his brother.

Abruptly, screams rang out from the hall behind him. Pheron swung around in shock, seeing Leroth jerk his head up at the same moment. Hanir came staggering out, hair afire, eyes wide and glazed and unseeing in the way they got when his mind rode the flame.

"Emmy!" he wailed and slumped to the stones.

Pheron blinked.

Leroth was there first, of course, throwing his arms around Hanir and joining in the wailing.

Pheron followed and knelt behind, watching. He still wondered why his first impulse had been to laugh.

Chapter Seven

Surprises on the Wing

"There are creatures in the world who don't see it as humans do. I hope by Elle that you never have to let your mind brush against one. They are wild, fierce, and vicious. They don't know right from wrong or have any concept of the Dark or the Light. Of course they serve Destiny, as all

things in the world do, but they can't learn the truth of the Cycle and serve it willingly. They are little more than brutes, slaves the Cycle uses to accomplish its more mysterious purposes. Can you imagine it, being outside the circle of Destiny? How horrible!"

—Tyeron Lightdancer, in *Terrible Truths of the World*.

"Go, Dyanse!"

Princess Emmeldra laughed as she watched the hound she had named after the herb that brought visions tear across the grass. Dyanse's coat glimmered such a perfect silver that it brought tears to Emmeldra's eyes. She was everything that Emmeldra had ever wanted in a dog, and already their minds were linked in telepathic communion, new thoughts and perceptions flowering in Emmeldra's mind so fast that she could barely pay attention to what Prince Lightflower was saying beside her.

"My sister should be arriving soon."

With effort, Emmeldra tore her gaze from Dyanse and smiled at him. Of course, she hadn't met the Princess Joydancer yet and didn't know what she was like, but if she was anything like Lightflower, Emmeldra couldn't wait for her to arrive. She had never known anyone so noble as Lightflower.

He had done everything, traveled everywhere that Destiny would permit him in the time before he had to come to Orlath and marry her as Destiny had also decreed, and Emmeldra didn't think she would get tired of his stories or the spellbinding way he told them. He had seen unicorns dancing in the moonlight in the Enchanted Forest. He had seen glittering rainbow-winged fairies weaving their spell over everyone around him, while he stood immune, since only he had had sense enough not to eat from the cakes that the Fairy Queen offered. He had called hawks from the sky all his life—the one he had called just before they set off on the hunt was curvetting above his head, cutting lazy circles in the air but never getting too far from him—and his tears turned to diamonds when he wanted them to. His kingdom would never be poor, and when he had wed her and was a Prince of Orlath, neither would her people be.

It was almost enough to make Emmeldra forget about the coming war with the Dark and the great part she would have to play in it.

Dyanse came trotting back with a hare in her mouth, and Emmeldra scratched her ears and sent her after another one, tying the hare behind the saddle with the one that already hung there.

"You are a wonder."

Emmeldra blinked at Lightflower's tone. "I'm afraid that I don't quite understand what you mean, my lord," she said, straightening up and looking at him again, lost in the splendid radiance of those verdant eyes.

"You are—your eyes are like the stars." Lightflower leaned across the distance between their horses and captured her hands, though he let his white stallion continue trotting while he gazed into her eyes. Emmeldra had no fear that he would fall or that he would tug her from her own snowy mare. His balance was as perfect as everything else about him. "Your face shines like the very sun. And your skin, my lady! Your skin is as flawless as the moon." He ran a light finger down her arm, and Emmeldra blushed and giggled. "You are the brightest of all the heavenly lights, and it is a wonder to me that your people do not look upon you and forsake the worship of Elle, turning to the worship of you instead."

"That is a very romantic thing to say," said Emmeldra, drawing back a little from him. "But it is still blasphemy."

Tears glittered in Lightflower's eyes as he bowed his head. About his horse's hooves they fell in a rain of little diamonds that flashed in the sun. "I had forgotten," he whispered. "I had forgotten that piety is part of you, too. I would marry a maiden who was pious, my lady. But I had not known that Destiny would bind me to love one who was."

Emmeldra reached out and brushed her fingers against his cheek. "I forgive you," she whispered. "I understand that you were carried away in the romance of the moment. And I can say that you are like the sun to me as well, the bright center of the world, and it is a wonder to me that heads do not turn and eyes do not follow you everywhere you go." Most of the people in the castle had looked at them that way, she remembered. But not Leroth, who stared into his cup moodily all the time, and not Hanir, who had followed Quillon outside the hall, discovered that he was a traitor to the Light, and slain him. Of course, Leroth had the weight of his destiny, and Hanir had the war against the Dark to worry about, but still...

"I will love you."

"And I will love you," Emmeldra said back to Lightflower, glad that Destiny had chosen her such a compatible mate. "More than I can ever speak. With life, with breath, with the heat that burns through me." She held out a hand, and a small puff of Scarlet rose from her fingers.

Lightflower put out his hand and echoed her. Emmeldra smiled at the flame. They were both Scarlet mages, of course, and Lightflower was the most powerful Scarlet mage anyone had seen in a hundred years. They would have children together who would become the most powerful mages in the world.

"May our flames always burn together as one," whispered Lightflower. "Ah, my lady, that I could be part of you, united and whole, in body and mind and soul, and never leave you again, for as long as a thousand lives of men."

Emmeldra thought she had never heard anything more beautiful. She touched his face again and then looked up as Dyanse trotted back, looking self-important. She had another hare in her mouth.

"Three!" said Emmeldra. "Good girl." She patted the hound on the head as she picked the hare up to tie it behind her saddle, and for a moment she received a flash of the dog's overwhelming love for her. She stroked her fingers along the short fur on top of Dyanse's head again and smiled.

"My lady," said Lightflower. "Though it might not be appropriate...would you permit me to sing a love song for you?"

"Yes," said Emmeldra.

"So quick to answer!" Lightflower bowed his head, eyes fixed on her face. "And I thought you were a modest maiden."

"I am, I am," said Emmeldra. "But...I would hear a love song from your lips, my lord. Surely nothing could come of that which we do not intend?"

"Surely not." Lightflower smiled at her then burst into song. He had a rich and rolling voice, so sweet that Emmeldra was not at all surprised when she heard the small ryalta birds of the grasses begin to sing along.

*"She lay in the bracken of the wood,
Her hair cast about her.
I longed, looking and listening,
To reach out, make her stir,
To make the sweet snoring breath*

Shout welcome to the summer.
The sun, the sun before dawn!

“But she lay there; I let her lie,
And thought how, as she lay,
The night was brightening around;
The night was becoming day.
I thought to look upon the sun
If I could but turn away.
The sun, the sun before dawn!

“I watched it brighten over her,
Her cheeks aglow with beams.
She murmured something like my name,
And once more sought her dreams.
I leaned forward, anxious now,
As the radiance flowed in streams.
The sun, the sun before dawn!

“She opened the dreams of my life,
Her eyes, thorns sharp and dark.
But they were and are roses too,
A glory of gloom and spark.
As she reached out a hand to me,
I heard a singing skylark.
The sun, the sun before dawn!

“But when I looked up, around,
There was no sun to be seen.
We crouched in darkness still,
In panoply of lightless green,
And no skylark sang overhead.
I wondered what it could mean.
The sun, the sun before dawn!

“Of course, I knew it at last:
Her face was the sun to me,
Making light out of the darkness,
Making trapped brilliance free.
When her dark-rose eyes opened,
They gave mine light to see.
The sun, the sun before dawn!

“She laughed when I told her so,
And denied it, as everything
That I tell her about her beauty

*She must away like that fling.
But further proof: when she laughed,
I heard a skylark sing.
The sun, the sun before dawn!"*

Emmeldra could feel tears running down her cheeks by the time Lightflower had finished. She reached out to him and opened her mouth to tell him that she couldn't wait any longer, that they had to have each other now even if it meant that they would not wait for the marriage bed. Songs were indeed dangerous, and in his singing like that he had won the last corners of her heart.

"My princess!"

Emmeldra turned. The shouter was one of the random nobles who had ridden along with them, and she felt a moment of annoyance. Couldn't he see that she was deep in a moment of romance with her love?

The random noble pointed upward.

Emmeldra looked up.

Sweeping above them, on great, gloom-spreading wings, was a dragon.

Emmeldra felt the blood drain from her face even as she heard the Destiny around her sing like metal. This, then, was the moment when she faced the first part of her Destiny, and alone. She felt her hand reach out for Lightflower's, and he took it and laid a light kiss on her knuckles.

"Be brave," he whispered.

The dragon dived.

Emmeldra smiled and lifted her arms. The dragon leveled out just above her, a great gray, a mindless brute with glaring golden eyes only interested in following the dictates of a Destiny it could not understand. It laid its talons on her shoulders and ripped her from the saddle.

Emmeldra glanced over her shoulder at Lightflower and saw him lift his shining sword.

He would find her. He was her Destined prince. She knew that he would come for her and kill the dragon.

She closed her eyes and let herself be borne away, a proud princess in the full glory of her Destiny.

Chapter Eight

Compassion

"No one knows what to do in a situation like this."

—Yillos Goldfleet, speaking to the students who appealed for advice when facing an angry thorn dragon.

Pheron turned his head to watch the priestesses of Elle arrive, pushing their way through the crowd so that several of the servants fell over. He had resigned himself to the entertainment

of his crying brother. All the kitchen servants had come out and crowded around the fallen Prince Hanir, and he wouldn't have a chance of getting a hot meal for a while, as the fires had gone out.

Well, why couldn't he go and build them up?

Pheron blinked a little at that. The thought was new, and it shouldn't have been. He shrugged and stood up. The healers had begun working on Hanir, and save for the flash of their gray robes and now and then a glimpse of Leroth, still crying, there wasn't much to see. He stepped back, surrendering his place to a young woman who looked wild to get it, then turned and staggered into the kitchens.

A few pokes was all it took to get the fire flaring again. At once, the pot hanging above overflowed. Pheron cursed and seized it, nearly staggering as he tried to support the heavy weight on just one arm. He had reached out his non-existent hand for it at the same time as his remaining one.

"Here, let me help you with that."

Pheron shrank a little, but the young woman who had taken the pot from him didn't appear to notice his missing arm. Or, at least, she was more concerned about the state of the pot than the state of him. Pheron relaxed a little and followed her as she put the hissing thing on a nearby table.

"Could you give me a bowl?" he asked.

She shot him a glance out of startling golden eyes that no doubt meant she had noble blood somewhere. "Why should I? You can reach it for yourself."

Pheron sighed. It seemed that she hadn't noticed, after all. He moved so that his missing arm was visible.

The girl's eyes widened, and for some reason she flushed. "Forgive me," she said. "I didn't realize that you were—"

Pheron interrupted before she could find some diplomatic way to say it. "Crippled, yes. Can you pass me a bowl?"

She handed him one, though of course now she couldn't seem to look away from him. Pheron tried to ignore it as he used the ladle from the pot to drop a few spoonfuls of stew into his bowl. It was unexpectedly difficult, at least until the girl clasped the pot and stopped it from moving around while he used the ladle.

"Thank you," said Pheron. It hurt his pride to accept such help, but it would have to be this way from now on, and the sooner he accepted that the better.

"You're welcome," said the girl.

Pheron nodded and turned toward the door, relieved that his first encounter with someone else after his wounding had gone better than he could have hoped.

"What happened to you?"

Pheron turned back. Perhaps it wasn't going to go so well. But as this girl couldn't be as bad as his brother, he would get used to her lesser compassion first, and then deal with Leroth, the paragon of pity. "I lost my arm to a sword," he said.

"Recently?"

"Last night."

The girl's eyes widened until they dominated her face. "Then why haven't you done anything?" she asked.

"Done anything?" Pheron wondered what she thought he ought to have done. He lifted the bowl with his hand. "I'm eating. That's about all I have the strength for at the moment."

The girl shook her head. "Gone to the healers. Sworn revenge on the one who did this to you. Something like that. Something noble." She couldn't seem to stop staring at him, and Pheron didn't know why. Just because she was new and he was crippled was no reason to stare...

Yes, it was. Or, at least, he knew that it would be reason enough in the future for some people to stare. Better that he get used to it now. Better that he get used to everything now, before he met his brother or someone else who knew him and would start crying tears of blood in an effort to show him just how compassionate they could be.

"I didn't want to," said Pheron. That was as much as he owed anyone, at least until Leroth pressed the details out of him, made a full and public confession, and fell to his knees begging their mother to send him to the dungeons. Just thinking about that turned Pheron's stomach. "As you can see, I've had the arm bandaged, and there might be something that I can do in the future to take revenge on the one who did this to me. But he can wait."

"Who was it?"

Pheron shook his head. No sense in giving Leroth publicity before he confessed. "I don't see why I should have to tell you that."

"Because I'm just a kitchen servant?" Her eyes flashed, and she pulled herself erect so fast that Pheron wondered who she thought she was fooling. She might have dressed like a common girl, but that gesture had far too much of noble pride in it, as did her words. Probably some princess from a neighboring kingdom, playing at dressing like a village maiden, or even the daughter of an Orlath noble. "You don't think I should get involved in the intrigues of the great? You want to protect me? You think—"

"No," said Pheron. "I'm not telling you because you're a stranger, and it's none of your business. Is that clear enough?"

She gaped at him again. Pheron rolled his eyes. "I'd work on your disguise," he said. "No one will think you're a servant for one day longer with that attitude." He started to turn away.

"Who are you?" she asked.

Pheron was not sure what made him answer. He was involved in looking over the courtyard for Leroth, after all, and trying to make sure that his brother hadn't left Hanir's side yet. "Pheron."

"That doesn't tell me who you are."

"It should." She must be from another kingdom, then. Every Orlathian noble was well-steeped in tales of the Destinyless prince of the line of Aneron.

"My name is Jienna. Does that tell you who I am?"

"No."

"Well, then."

Pheron had to look back at her. This was getting too ridiculous. "You can't make some sort of bargain with me, where you give me your name and I give you mine, and we trade histories," he said. "That won't work. I don't know who you are, but I don't care, and that's the difference. Play whatever game you want to and worry your parents as you will and find your Destined prince as you will. It's probably Hanir."

Jienna started as if he had shocked her. "How did you know that?"

"Lightflower's lost in Emmeldra, and Leroth is lost in his own head and his doomed, tragic love," said Pheron. He found it easier to speak his mind than he thought he would. After all, if she was an out-kingdom princess come to marry into his family, she wouldn't believe a word of it anyway. It was easier to talk to someone like that than it was to talk to himself. He knew the reality. She didn't. "It has to be Hanir. He's the only one left."

“Who are you?”

Pheron grinned at her. “Pheron.”

“I will find out,” said Jienna.

Pheron laughed. “Good luck.” There were few people in the whole of the castle who remembered his name, at least when someone else asked them. Pheron had played that game a few times in the past when he was bored, asking them to guess his name and being rewarded with blank looks and many guesses that never got too near the mark.

Jienna stared at him in silence. Pheron checked the courtyard again, nodded to himself in satisfaction, and moved off, back to his tower. He managed to get about halfway up the steps before hunger overcame him and he sat down, in plain sight, to eat. He didn’t think it was too great a risk. Hanir and Leroth were still wailing.

He’d eaten most of the stew by the time Leroth sprang to his feet, Acandra held above his head, and cried, “The Princess Emmeldra has been taken by a dragon! So my most noble brother, the Prince Hanir, saw in his vision. I will find her and bring her back safe to the kingdom of Orlath that treasures her so.”

Pheron shook his head and sipped at his stew again.

Hanir sprang up in the next moment, and Ulua flamed in the morning sun. “I will find my sister!” he cried. “Surely this should be a task for her beloved twin brother, who shares her heart and her face and her gifts.”

Pheron grinned. He had to admit that it was amusing to watch them. He almost wondered who would rescue Emmeldra first.

He couldn’t bring himself to care that much, though. Someone would rescue her. There would be shock and tears and looks of gratitude, and the common people would have another story to tell about the royal line in the first days of the newest war with the Dark. That was the way things went. Which prince did it mattered very little when everything was said and done.

“My sons!”

Pheron turned his gaze to his mother. Queen Annilda came striding into the center of the courtyard, looking regal and pale and more put-out than Pheron would have thought.

“Both of you cannot go into danger,” she said to them. “If Emmeldra dies in the dragon’s clutches—”

“Which we know won’t happen,” mouthed Pheron.

“—and the one who goes to rescue her dies as well, in answer to Destiny, then one of you will need to remain here and rule the kingdom when I am gone.”

Pheron sighed. He had heard those words before or echoes of them. Aneron had spoken them to her own children, and years of civil war had followed as the brothers attempted to usurp the throne from one another. It looked as though his mother had just started a civil war of their very own.

Sure enough, Hanir and Leroth glared at each other for a long second. Then Hanir bowed his head and said, “My lady mother, I cannot remain still here while my twin sister is borne away to torments unspeakable. Grant me leave to go after her, and I will never ask you for another thing.”

Annilda turned and faced Hanir, the wind stirring her hair. “You would ask this of me?” she asked. “Ask me to let my eldest son go into danger?”

“I must,” said Hanir, and his gold-flecked green eyes were shining. Of course they were, thought Pheron, though he couldn’t see them from that height. It was his own knowledge of Destiny, so useful when it came to his family, guiding him again. “Lives unborn ride on this

decision. Who am I to selfishly keep my own life when lives unborn ride on it?"

Annilda was weeping—of course she was—as she reached out and embraced her eldest son. "You are right," she said. "You must go." She turned to Leroth. "You will stay here."

"I cannot, Mother. I will face the greatest Dark, just as my prophecy says, and what is a dragon but the greatest Dark?"

"You must stay, Leroth."

"Mother, not even you may command or turn aside the will of Elle, and it is the will of Elle that I should go forth on this dragon-hunt."

Do they even listen to themselves? They sound like characters in a play.

Annilda turned her back. Leroth trembled in the throes of the rebellion that would lead him to glory.

Pheron rolled his eyes, turned, and went into the tower, where he reached out for his spare winter cloak on the foot of his pallet. It was time to practice putting on his clothes one-handed.

If there was going to be a civil war, then he was leaving.

After a short time, the Damned Spider descended from a thread and watched him as he cursed and thrashed and struggled and in general started through the first changes.

Chapter Nine

Compassion at its Finest

"Never think that strength alone

Can cleave a dragon's blood and bone.

Never think that one hero born of man

Can do all that a hero's Destiny can."

—First four lines of the prophecy given to Queen Aneron's eldest son.

"She is doing this because I am the youngest, and she doesn't think that I'm worth as much as the others."

Prince Leroth muttered the words to himself as he shoved a change of clothes into a bag. He couldn't take much time to pack, since he had to slip out the back way while everyone was cheering Hanir as he left by the front gate. He had to go and do the things that a true hero had to do. No one else knew the truth, and no one would listen to him if he tried to tell them.

"Scarlet mages are useless against dragons," he announced to his room as he tied the bag shut and flung it over his shoulder. "They can handle dragonfire, but it wasn't a red dragon that took Emmeldra. Don't the idiots *realize* that?"

No, they don't. Leroth sniffed as he began to climb out the window and down the outside wall with expert, squirrel-like skill. But then, they wouldn't. They were all unrefined idiots compared to him, which was the reason that he had to do things like this and fall into tragedy.

Leroth felt tears returning to his eyes. Everything was always left up to him, and he wasn't sure why. After all, he was the youngest of three royal children, and he had Gust magic that, while powerful and beautiful, didn't always do as many useful things as Scarlet magic. It

was unlikely that he would inherit the crown unless he had to take it over to prevent someone incompetent from ruling Orlath. Why was he the one who had to be the hero instead of Hanir or Emmeldra?

Because they can't do it, he heard the whisper in his mind, as if Elle had spoken to him again. *And you can.*

Yes, he had to do it, but he still wasn't sure why fate couldn't have chosen someone else, someone who would have the support and love of his people.

Well, at least when the bards came to sing his tale, it would make a better story, that he was the rebellious prince who went forth on a grand journey and saved his sister from the clutches of a gray dragon when no one else thought he could.

Leroth reached the bottom of the tower and walked toward the stables, doing his best to look casual. Though a few people gave him suspicious looks, no one stopped him. He reached the stables and at once dropped into telepathic communion with his roan stallion, Herosteed, who would bite anyone else but danced like a foal whenever Leroth entered the stalls.

Someone is here, Herosteed let him know.

Leroth softened his steps and peered over the top of the stall at the intruder. A stablehand it looked like, though Leroth didn't recognize him as more than that, since the man had his back to the prince. He was clucking as he tried to get a bridle over the head of a sorrel mare, who snorted and backed away from him. The bridle fell to the ground. The man cursed and stooped awkwardly to get it.

His arm...

Something was wrong with his arm.

The man turned around, and Leroth felt his eyes widen. It was Pheron. He looked tired and pale, but it was Pheron.

What had Leroth done to him?

Leroth felt tears fill his eyes, and he stepped forward so that Pheron could see him. Pheron cursed as the sorrel mare startled and the bridle tumbled down again, but this time, when he turned around and noticed Leroth, he went very still.

Leroth didn't understand the expression on Pheron's face. Usually, people were glad to see Leroth, or they pitied him his grand Destiny and his terrible sorrow, and that showed in their faces. But Pheron just stood and watched him come, his features inflexible. His eyes burned. That was the only sign of emotion.

"Pheron. Did I cut off your arm?"

Pheron moved his right sleeve a little to the side, turning and dipping his arm so that the stump poked out. Leroth began to weep. The cut looked as if it would have hurt.

"I'm so sorry," said Leroth. "I know that I'll carry the guilt for the rest of my life, and I know that it was an unfair thing to do to you." He took a step closer. "When you're in love with a mermaid, sometimes your thoughts become twisted. Since I know that she has to live in the ocean and I have to live on land and I'll get to see her in a few bittersweet meetings which Destiny will arrange, if I'm lucky—"

Pheron, without altering expression, stooped and picked up a handful of straw from the stable floor, which he threw at Leroth. Most of it wisped apart in the air before it got to him, but there was a solid clump of manure at the center of it all, and that stuck to Leroth's tunic.

"I know you're upset," said Leroth, ignoring his brother's obvious distress. "If you'd just try and see it from my point of view—I will be tormented by guilt worse than the pain you felt when your arm came off—"

Pheron stood still, but his eyes darted above Leroth's head.

Abruptly, something seized Leroth around the legs and tripped him. He went down hard to the stable floor, his head knocking on the wood and tears of physical pain coming to his eyes for the first time in a long while.

What...?

Leroth managed to turn and look up, and he screamed. The largest spider he had ever seen hung there, glistening with a coating of purple slime, its eight legs sawing back and forth. As he watched, it descended closer and closer, glaring at him with seven intact eyes. One of them close beside those seven had been pierced, and he could see into an interior filled with glittering liquid.

The spider was his clear antagonist. A loop of silk had hooked around Leroth's legs and tripped him, and as he watched, the spider wove another loop and held it ready to throw.

Pheron's voice reached his ears then, low and amused. "Strange. The Damned Spider must have decided that it doesn't like you."

"You know this thing?" Leroth asked, so disgusted that he could hardly speak. The loop of silk trembled in the spider's grip, and it swirled its body a little to the side, as if it couldn't decide where best to throw it.

"I've had it sleeping in the same room as me for the last two years," said Pheron.

"It would never have been allowed into the royal wing!"

Leroth didn't know what emotion was in Pheron's voice as he answered. He was only sure that he had never heard that emotion before. "I haven't slept in the royal wing of the castle since I was a child, Leroth. I thought you knew *that*, at least. I slept in the old tower. The Damned Spider thought the tower was its territory."

"Why didn't you move?"

"I considered that Spider less important than being in a place where people wouldn't patronize me."

Ah, here it was, the true root cause of the problem. Leroth was relieved that the solution was so simple. "Pheron, I know you're jealous of us," he said. "I can't imagine what it must be like to be born outside Destiny, in the knowledge that the Cycle didn't care enough to assign you a place. But you can't blame us for it. None of us controls Destiny, and none of us knew that you wouldn't be important to the war against the Dark."

"I know that," said Pheron.

"But you are jealous."

"No," said Pheron. "I used to be, that's true. But I've gotten more and more used to thinking of your lot as prancing characters in a play. It's true that I hate you now, but that has nothing to do with jealousy—"

"But it must—"

"And a lot more to do with the fact that you cut off my arm!"

"I was in a state of high emotion—I didn't know what I was doing—"

"The Damned Spider does what it wants," Pheron interrupted him. "But I suspect that it might do something discouraging to you in this case, and I'm in full agreement with that." He turned back to the sorrel mare, this time managing to bridle her. The mare stood quiet as he gathered her reins in his hand.

"You're not taking any saddlebags?" asked Leroth.

"What would I take?" asked Pheron. "Jewels?" He paused as if the thought had sparked something, though, and smiled a little. "Yes," he said. "You won't be needing this." He walked

back and kicked hard at Leroth's side. For a moment, Leroth thought his brother meant to torture him and braced himself to nobly suffer the pain. But instead, he felt the buckle on his belt split open, and then Pheron stooped and removed Acandra from his side.

"You can't wield her," said Leroth. "She won't fight for any hand but mine."

"I know that," said Pheron and tossed the sword in the air. It didn't come back down. Twisting his head, Leroth saw that the Damned Spider had woven a loop of silk about the blade's hilt and was supporting her rapidly up into the darkness, to Elle knew what horrible web.

"You can't do that," said Leroth.

"Yes, I can," said Pheron, and then he turned and mounted his horse, riding out of the stable. As he passed Herosteed's stall, Leroth's horse tried to kick his way through the wall and tear into the evil man, but Pheron ignored him. The walls of the stable held sturdy, and the sorrel mare only shied a little before going on her way.

Leroth shook his head as the Damned Spider flung another coil of silk around his body and wrenched him off the floor. There was only one explanation for all of this.

Pheron was in league with Hanir, and they were both in league with the Dark.

There was no other reason that they would stop him from going after Emmeldra and rescuing her, except that they both wanted the glory, and they were evil.

And they had this spider, an ugly creature of evil, doing their work for them.

That was Leroth's only comfort as he was hauled into the air, deposited on a rafter, and then thoroughly wound in a cocoon. He remained calm as the silk crept over his body. After all, his Destiny wouldn't allow him to end his days as a spider's meal, even the meal of a spider like this one. It had far better ends in store. Acandra would land beside him on the rafter, just in arm's reach, and he would cut his way free and then warn his mother about the betrayal of her son.

Except that Acandra didn't land on the rafter beside him, and after the Damned Spider had finished wrapping him up, it strung him into the web and then climbed out the window.

Leroth hung there, gently twisting in the silk, and watched the stable far below, where Herosteed was making a frantic noise that would attract someone soon.

And when that person came in, he would look up and see the prince who tried so hard bound up in a cocoon.

Leroth closed his eyes and began to cry.

Chapter Ten

Riding

"If you can't summon the strength to ride, then what are you good for?"

—Supposed words of Queen Aneron to her younger son.

All right, so he wasn't halfway across the Corlirin Plains. It just felt that way. Pheron pulled up, gasping harshly, and bent over the stitch in his side.

He had to straighten up again at once, though. The weakness was even worse, and he was

going to fall off the mare if he bent over too far. Loss of blood and little food and the loss of an arm...

He couldn't go much further.

Pheron sat up as straight as he could and looked around with blurred eyes. The Corlirin stretched ahead of him, green and gold grass waving in the sunlight and already wavering more than that, given the way that his head pounded. The Terrana River flowed not far to the west, heading toward the Lilitha Ocean with the merry laughter of a child. Now and then, his eyes caught a sparkle from the water and mistook it for the gleam from a sword.

But he didn't have a sword.

He didn't have a bow.

He didn't have any way to catch game.

Pheron shook his head. He was *not* going to regret his decision. Miserable as his existence might be for a few months, he still wouldn't bewail his decision or go back. Anything was better than staying there to watch his brothers war against each other and listen to the savage and murderous plots and watch his sister and her Destined prince fall more and more deeply in love. Perhaps he could even find a place where it wouldn't matter that he didn't have a Destiny.

That thought made him feel so much better that he smiled a little. He should have tried leaving the castle a long time ago.

The mare snorted and shifted restlessly beneath him. Pheron gazed down at her, stroking her mane. He should keep her. He could move more swiftly across the grasslands on her back, and that might be important in keeping ahead of pursuers as well as in reaching one of the villages in the center of the Plains sooner. But the mare was far too fine to have come from any but the Queen's stables. Someone would think he had stolen her—which he had—or think he was a royal courier and prevail on him to carry a message, dragging him into the middle of some mess or another.

Pheron slid from the mare, half-folding as he hit the ground. He had to send her back to the stables. He did manage to slide the bridle over her head, and he looped that over his arm after a few snapping tosses. That could be important. He would have to gnaw the leather if he could find nothing better.

"Back you go," he said to the mare and tapped her on the rump.

She stared at him and didn't move.

Pheron rolled his eyes. The horses had been trained over the centuries to sensitivity to the blood of Aneron and to be faithful companions, sometimes even true telepathically bound ones, such as Leroth's Herosteed. It had taken some doing to persuade the horses to get used to him, but now this mare apparently thought of him as a prince on a quest and didn't want to leave him.

"Go," he said and slapped her this time.

The mare gave him a betrayed glance from liquid eyes and then turned and trotted away. Pheron smiled as he watched her move. Her hooves hit the ground in seeming indignation, and from her steps there sprang up ryalta birds, scolding all the way.

Birds...

Pheron felt his eyes widen, and his stomach rumbled so hard that he nearly fell over again.

Where there were birds, there would be small nests. And where there were nests, there would be eggs.

Pheron moved forward as fast as he could behind the trotting mare, who ignored him. He would have to catch her head in his hand and stroke her nose and make a personal apology

before she would accept him as her rider again. Luckily for Pheron, that wasn't what he wanted. He just wanted to track one of the ryalta birds with his gaze and find a nest.

The first he found had a cheeping fledgling and a pair of eggs in it. Pheron took them both, breaking the chick's neck as much by crushing as anything else. He couldn't afford to be choosy.

The eggs shattered when he gripped them too hard. He did manage to get some of the yolk in his mouth. It tasted terrible and didn't last for more than a few seconds before slithering down his throat. But it would fill his stomach and stop it growling, keeping him alive long enough to get to a village, and that was the important thing.

He managed to find three other nests and retired to the bank of the River with a feeling of accomplishment. A patient hunt produced a handful of grass and two stones that would strike sparks. Soon, with some difficulty, he had a tiny fire going. He hunched over it to prevent it from dying in the wind and spitted the chicks by sticking a branch in the ground and jamming them on it. Blood flew everywhere. Pheron ignored it. The stick would make it easier to roast them and also made it easier for him to tear feathers free before he did that.

When he did eat the chicks, they were too hot in some places and too cold in others, and he burned his tongue and had to gulp from the stream. He reached out for things constantly with his missing right hand, and sometimes his arm ached as if there were still flesh there to hurt. But when night began to fall, his stomach was full and he was warmer than he had any right to expect. He would survive.

Pheron had just lain back and closed his eyes when he heard a familiar scuttling sound. He opened his eyes again and found the Damned Spider crouched not far away, staring at him. Something wrapped in silk lay just behind it.

"You didn't bring Leroth, did you?" he asked in sudden dread of what the package might be.

The Damned Spider came forward, making the gentle moving of its mandibles that seemed to indicate it was trying to be peaceful. Pheron eyed it and waited.

The silk-wrapped bundle wasn't large enough to be Leroth, he noted with relief. Probably a hare or a hound. The Damned Spider pushed it toward him and sat waiting.

Pheron frowned at the bundle, then at the spider.

The Damned Spider came slowly forward. Pheron tensed for a charge, but the creature didn't make one. Instead, it wrapped its front legs around the bundle and sank its fangs in just behind the neck. Pheron watched as it drank then stepped back and offered the bleeding thing to him.

Pheron snorted laughter, and sudden understanding as he remembered the silk-wrapped thing that the Spider had tried to offer him last night.

"You're not my mother," he said to the Spider. "You don't have to feed me. Besides, I just ate."

The Spider backed off but left the silk-wrapped thing where it lay. Pheron considered it and then the Spider and decided he couldn't just reject the gift outright. The Damned Spider might get angry. He sighed and dragged it closer to him with a foot, proud that he had checked his motion forward with his right arm at the last moment.

"It might come in useful," he said and tucked it beneath his head. It did make a nice pillow, whatever it was. Pheron closed his eyes and let the remaining warmth of his sputtering fire soak into him. He was tired beyond tired.

What was he going to do?

The question returned to him full force, and he sighed. There wasn't much that he could

do, even if he'd had both arms. He wasn't trained in any kind of trade, save fighting, and his right arm had been his sword arm, so that was at an end. He didn't have elemental magic which would have made him welcome anywhere. He didn't really know much more about the world than could be learned from old songs and tapestries and books that his mother insisted he be familiar with. There were villages in the Corlirin Plains that grew food and sent it to his mother's castle. That was all he knew.

On the other hand, he wouldn't be marked out as a member of the royal family, especially now that he'd sent the mare back. Elemental magic of the strength that his brothers and sister possessed would have made people think he was a prince in exile even if he wasn't or part of some grand Destiny. He had no great sword nor jewels with him. He could probably do things that anyone else could do, once he learned them. And he had some months before winter came. All he needed to do was enter a village and see what happened. He would take up begging if nothing else offered itself, though he would probably have to go to Ozue or Corlinth, one of the greater cities, to turn a profit at that.

He let the worries drift away and closed his eyes.

* * *

Pheron opened his eyes, just in time to find himself face to face with a cheetah.

Pheron rolled out of the way. The great cat sprang over him and streaked toward the river without so much as a backward glance. Pheron glanced behind it in bewilderment, wondering what was happening.

A deer, a flurry of hares, and another cheetah nearly trampled him in the next few moments. Warily, he sat up and began coaxing the fire back into life. If some great predator was hunting the Plains, then he wanted a weapon.

The Damned Spider appeared out of the darkness so suddenly that he started. Pheron frowned at it, then sighed. He supposed it would be some more protection, unused as he was to having the Spider protect him instead of trying to kill him.

He looked back into the darkness of the Plains, but nothing presented itself, and he didn't smell the musky scent of a *kindlei*, one of the huge tigers that could make all other animals of the Corlirin flee in terror. Moments passed, and no more animals appeared. Pheron thought that perhaps the danger was over with.

Or else the *kindlei* had killed all of them.

"Stop thinking like that," Pheron muttered to himself, and that was when he heard the sound. A dozen sailors might have been tearing sailcloth nearby, over and over again. Pheron shrank down near the bank of the Terrana and hid the light of his fire with his body. If searchers from the castle were nearby, he didn't want to alert them to his presence.

No, not nearby.

Overhead.

A ringing cry sounded in his ears, drums and trumpets and flutes mingled. Pheron felt his head spin, and he slumped to the ground, uncaring that his hair was starting to sizzle from the nearness of the fire. His eyes, his attention, all his being was trained upward.

It only showed itself as a shadow across the stars, the shadow of a great body flying with terrible joy. But Pheron knew it for the dragon it was. It wheeled and came back with that same breathtaking swiftness, faster than a horse, faster than a unicorn, faster than anything except possibly a gryphon. Pheron had never thought to see one so close, even in this indistinct light,

and he thought his heart was going to break.

Abruptly, the dragon paused, hovering not far overhead. Then, the tearing sailcloth closer than ever as its mighty wings backbeat, it settled to the ground, the wind from its wings blowing out the fire and bending the grasses. Pheron heard the Damned Spider scuttling to safety, but he couldn't move. He lay there, staring up as the dragon sat not twenty feet from him on its haunches, neck curved and head poised as if listening.

The neck uncoiled, pointing straight at him. Pheron found himself staring into two golden eyes that shone with their own light, enabling him to see scales as bright as any manifestation of the Scarlet around the dragon's face. The pointed jaws opened, and a tongue as scarlet flickered out, testing the air.

Sniffing for him, Pheron realized in surprise. It couldn't seem to see him, even though the golden eyes were locked on his own. Were dragons blind? None of the legends about them had ever mentioned that.

The dragon sniffed several times but couldn't seem to decide if something was there or not. Its head swayed back and forth, the chin scales less than a foot above Pheron's face. Then the neck retracted with the same startling speed, and the dragon lowered its head slightly and opened its jaws again, sucking in its breath.

Pheron's joy fled, replaced by sheer terror.

He turned and dove into the cold waters of the Terrana as wildfire exploded behind him.

Chapter Eleven

Riding to Victory

*"Master of the Scarlet, Master of the Flame,
We bow down to thee. Glory to thy name!
Master of the Swiftest Element, of Glory and of Fire,
All praises to thy name; man cannot reach higher."*

—From a hymn to the god Rennon, probably composed in the early days of the Rennon Heresy.

"My lord!"

"I see it."

Prince Hanir responded calmly, though he could feel his heart thundering in his ears. He had ridden from the gate of the castle with the sure and certain conviction that something was going to happen before he ever reached his sister, something that was the real reason he had to go after her. It would take a prince of his courage and conviction to conquer it.

Not that he wasn't worried about Emmy, too, of course. But she would be all right for as long as it took him to reach her. That was the way Destiny worked.

This...this would not wait.

Just ahead of him, wildfire hit the ground and began to spread across the Corlirin in long washes of red and gold. The red dragon responsible for it reared up near the Terrana, roaring

in that oddly dissonant mixture of instruments that marked a dragon's voice, and then turned and launched itself into the air straight at him. Golden eyes glowed with ferocity and that direct stare that dragons were famous for.

Hanir found that he was smiling.

Scarlet magic was useless against a dragon that breathed fire. He would have to rely on his sword and the skill that he had trained for all his life. He pulled up his stallion, black Usant, and drew his sword. The dragon roared again at the sight of it and circled once before diving at him, forelegs thrown out.

Usant faced the dragon bravely, rearing on his hind legs and answering the dragon's second roar with a dazzling war-cry of his own. Hanir tightened the grip of his legs on Usant's sides and smiled. If the beast kept diving just as it was now, then it would spit itself on Ulua's point without even slowing.

It didn't.

Instead, the tail sliced in from the side, from nowhere, and hit Usant in the flank. Tearing spikes a foot long opened such gaping wounds that the stallion didn't even have time to scream before he died.

He fell, taking Hanir with him.

The transition was so sudden that Hanir found it hard to breathe. One moment he was awaiting his first dragon-kill and endless glory in the songs of the bards. The next, he was flying through the air and landing in grass already turning hot with the approach of the fire. He pulled himself quickly to his feet and looked around for his sword, which had flown with him.

Gone.

The red dragon settled on Usant's body and leaned close, fangs bared and gleaming in the firelight. Hanir stared at it, wondering if it would lunge forward and eat him without a pause. This was already so different from the songs that he wouldn't really be surprised if Destiny had failed that badly.

"That was stupid, human, even for someone like you."

Hanir clenched his fists. Someone was pulling a joke on him. This was something Leroth might do, if his brother was feeling in the right mood. "Who's speaking?" he asked.

"I am. Human." There was such a weight of contempt in that word that Hanir turned his eyes unwillingly to the dragon's. Literally glowing golden orbs laughed at him, and then the red beast lowered its head and began to rip open Usant's side. Hanir felt sick as he watched the dragon snap up Usant's liver, and not only because of the gore.

"This was never meant to happen," he said tightly. "Destiny has failed in some way."

"It has not." The dragon sounded bored, and somehow it could speak even with the liver in the way of its tongue and teeth, increasing Hanir's suspicions that its voice wasn't so much physical as mental. "Your Destiny has prevailed, as always. After all, you're still alive." It ripped again, and gore fountained out around its talons, glowing like lava in the radiance of the wildfire. The dragon lowered its head and lapped at the blood. It continued speaking, still without trouble. "We are outside Destiny, that's all, and if we cannot harm you then we can harm your horses and your attendants and your beloved."

"My beloved?" Strangely, it took Hanir a moment to realize that the dragon probably meant the Princess Joydancer of Doralissa. He found himself thinking of Jienna the kitchen maid instead.

"Oh, not right now," said the dragon. "Right now it's just the horse."

Hanir trembled, his outrage overpowering his confusion. "Dragons can't talk," he said

flatly. "And Usant deserved a better end than your stomach."

"Deserved, perhaps," said the dragon and ripped out Usant's throat, drenching Hanir in blood. He didn't move. He was going to stay there and let the blood drench him. He should have been able to protect Usant in some way. He owed his dead horse something. "Not going to get."

"You are outside the Destiny," said Hanir, "outside the Cycle. Why are you interfering now when you have not interfered with the Cycle in so long?"

"We've learned some things that made us unhappy," said the dragon, and Hanir clearly heard the crack of bone as it dug into Usant's body. "The Light's war with the Dark is nothing to us, but the Light itself is. Some of the people who wrote your books about us have said... uncomplimentary things. They must be the source of that ridiculous rumor that dragons can't talk." It licked its jaws almost daintily and turned its head so that Hanir got the full force of those lamp-like eyes. "And so now, we've decided that we'll do as much damage to the Light as we can."

"You've always done that." Hanir found himself relaxing, back on familiar ground. "You are part of the Dark, and you serve its purposes."

"No," said the red dragon. "We've just hunted to feed ourselves. Now we're going to get nasty." It licked its jaws contemplatively, then nodded over his shoulder. "This, for example."

Hanir turned and found himself catching his breath. Wildfire ran across the Corlirin, so many flames of so many different colors that he knew one Scarlet mage would never be able to control them all. He couldn't stop the fire, and it would burn the grass and turn animals and villagers out of their homes.

He felt tears run down his face as he turned back to the dragon. "Do you enjoy this?" he asked. "Being so cruel?"

"No more than you enjoy being so pompous." The dragon yawned, exhaling a stink of smoke and carrion breath into Hanir's face. "We are what we are. You can't help it, and we can help it but choose not to." It paused and then said, "There is one thing we might bargain for."

"What is that?" Hanir hated the thought of making any bargains with the Dark, but then, after all, he didn't have to keep his word if it conflicted with his Destiny.

"There was a man by the Terrana River," said the dragon. "I know it. I could smell him. But I couldn't see him, and I can always see them, whether they belong to the Light or the Dark. I breathed fire, but I think he escaped. I will put out the wildfire if you tell me who that man was and what you're using him for."

"I don't know who you're talking about."

"You don't have a spy coming to rescue the Princess Emmeldra?"

"I am coming to rescue the Princess Emmeldra. Using spies is dishonorable."

The dragon laughed abruptly. "Of course you are," it said. "Red hair, suitably dramatic eyes, ringing voice...I see it now. I was a fool not to see it before. But you are sure that there is no one else? You are quite sure? Our Queen, Cloudshadow, would be willing to pull the dragons back for word of something new. It is centuries since she has found something she did not know."

Hanir shook his head. "I do not understand you, dragon, and I am glad that my allegiance to the Light makes it impossible for me to do so. Creature of the Dark!"

The dragon parted its jaws and tilted its head to the side. Hanir found himself wondering, insanely, if that might be its version of a smile. "No, you don't understand me," said the dragon. "That means that I can say anything I like and get away with it, and our Queen will not scold me for treason. Ah, what fun this is! I am neither of Light nor Dark, nor are any of my people. Let the wildfire burn itself out, then, Prince of the Light. Hardly a good thing to do, I would think,

but that is what comes of someone being a slave to Destiny.”

Great wings flapped, with a sound like dying moths, and the dragon sprang upward. Hanir tilted his head to watch it go, unwillingly. There was something almost beautiful about dragons, though of course only a fool could find them appealing. It was really too bad that they had to be part of the Dark.

He turned to watch the wildfire and felt his eyes widen. A man was riding toward him out of the flames, the red streamers curling back on either side of him as though they were bowing to him. The man’s horse snorted and shied but kept trotting, which was a remarkable feat in itself. Hanir thought that even Usant might have balked if asked to walk through pure Scarlet.

The man came closer and closer, and the firelight glittered on silver-platinum curls and in jade eyes. He saw Hanir and halted, staring, for a moment, then shook his head. “Of course you are not Emmeldra,” he said, as he guided the white stallion closer. “But you are her twin, and you must be hunting for her.”

“Prince Lightflower?”

“The same.” Lightflower smiled at him, and a flicker of Scarlet curled up from his palms. “We must find out some way to halt the wildfire. We are Scarlet mages with a Destiny, and I think we can do it. Will you help me?”

Hanir didn’t need a moment to consider. Usant’s death and the dragon’s taunting words had left him with a determination to do something about the wildfire that didn’t depend on making a bargain with the Dark. He nodded and called his own magic.

Together, they turned to face the flames.

Chapter Twelve

Royalty

“The most royal actions are the ones that cost us the least.”

—Klessa of the Nine Wonders, at her trial for blasphemy.

Pheron would have screamed as he came back up in the midst of flames. He would have, but he couldn’t spend another moment in the superheated air without breathing some of it in and probably permanently hurting himself. He dove back into the Terrana, lungs hurting, and stroked straight for the bottom of the river.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t far away. The river simply wasn’t as deep or broad here as it became later in its course. Pheron’s hand bumped into mud, and he had to stop himself from digging into it, trying frantically to get away. That wasn’t going to do him a whole lot of good.

He had only a moment to decide what to do, and he hoped that he was making the right decision.

He couldn’t hope to swim out of the flames or outwait them. Besides, there was the chance that dragonfire would jump the river, and the water that should act as a firebreak wouldn’t. There might be fire awaiting him on the far bank even if he did manage to swim to it.

He released his frantic hold on a rock buried in the mud and let himself drift away.

The current rolled him swiftly south and east, toward the Lilitha Ocean. Pheron found himself hoping that he could manage to stop before he got to the vast cataract where the Terrana plunged over the cliffs in full sight of his family's castle.

Then he wondered why he was worrying about that, when the need to breathe was so much more urgent.

He fought his way back to the surface, and this time the foul air burst out of his lungs and the clean came in before he could check to make sure it was safe. It appeared to be, though. No heat awaited him, and though firelight glowed in the water, it seemed as though the wind was tossing the fire back into the center of the Corlirin, rather than across the water. Pheron relaxed slightly and glanced up, trying to catch some glimpse of the dragon in the sky.

There it was!

Pheron caught his breath in spite of himself. The great red was diving at a single figure on a horse, holding an upraised sword. It had to be one of his brothers, Pheron thought. No one else would be so stupid as to stand before a dragon attack like that.

The dragon's tail lashed out and caught the horse. It and its rider went down. Pheron didn't have a chance to see what happened next, since the river curved and threw him against a rock.

All the breath went out of his body, and as he spun and his head dropped beneath the surface. That was definitely not a good thing.

Pheron reached out with his left arm and caught the rock. His non-existent right arm twinged as he spun around and floated against the current, at the limit of his limb. He would tear loose in a moment. He probably couldn't have managed this even with two arms.

But that stubbornness that had helped him on the beach where Leroth cut off his arm came back to him. He was going to survive, for no better reason than that he wanted to. On the other hand, that was probably a good enough reason.

He thrust his head above the water again, coughed and choked, and hauled himself close to the rock. Once again, a shift of the current caught him and flung him against it. Once again, the breath flew out of his body. Once again, he hiccupped and held on, closing his eyes and sinking his strength into his fingers.

Pheron had once used to dream that he would wake up one day and find that he had a Destiny and elemental magic after all. He had put a lot of effort into sustaining those daydreams before realizing it would never happen. He called that concentration now and made the stone the only real thing in the world, more important even than the growing pain in his stump.

"Hang on."

Pheron didn't open his eyes or release his grip on the rock, certain that his mind was playing tricks on him in his desperation. The texture of the rock wasn't as smooth as it had seemed at first. There were crevices in the hump of it, crevices that might allow his fingers to worm in, crevices that might mean he survived for a few more minutes.

Something rough brushed his arm. Pheron started and heard a curse.

"Grab it! It's slipping off the rock."

Pheron opened his eyes and saw a rope slithering across the stone in front of him. He grabbed it with his left arm, nearly toppling backward into the river as he did so.

"With both arms!"

Pheron ignored that. He didn't have the breath or the time to explain, and if the man couldn't see his crippled state, then he was probably blind and going to kill Pheron anyway. At least the rope was comforting, rougher and more real even than the rock had been.

The rope moved, tugging him with it. Pheron splashed off the rock and into cold water again. He gasped, shivering, but clung to the lifeline still. When his rescuer finally pulled him onto the bank, it took him some moments to persuade Pheron to unclench his fist.

"You're safe now," the man said, and the bewildered tone in his voice was what finally broke through Pheron's daze. He opened his eyes and found himself staring into a face so darkened by the sun that it might have belonged to one of the arrogant jungle traders who came to offer up a handful of healing flowers for outrageous amounts of gold. The eyes were silver, though, and the Destiny about him was as thick as the braid of black hair slung around his shoulders. "You can sit up."

Pheron shook his head and summoned his voice from wherever the river had put it. "I don't think I can."

"Brace yourself on your hands."

Well, perhaps he really hadn't noticed. Pheron rolled to the side, using his one arm, and his stump as much as he could. He heard the indrawn breath and stiffened for the onslaught of pity.

It didn't come. "I have a fire," said the man.

"So do I," said Pheron stupidly and turned to look at the far bank, where he assumed the dragon-lit flames still raged.

They were gone, and the bank was dark, though the stink of burned grass hung heavy in the night. Pheron stared at it, then shook his head. He didn't really care what had happened. All that he wanted was to rest, perhaps to sleep and never wake up again. When the shock and the daze faded, he would have to face quite a bit of pain, at least if the aches from his ribs and head were any indication.

"You came from that inferno?" The man reached out and pulled him easily to his feet. "I think I see why you risked the river. Come with me. There are some fresh clothes I have that might fit you—hot food—"

"I just want to sleep," said Pheron.

"You don't want anything else?" asked the man. "And you have no words of thanks for how I rescued you?"

Pheron's temper flared, clearing the haze from his head fully. Pain immediately jumped on him and tried to kick him to death, but he held steady, his eyes fixed on the man's. "Orlath nobles are all the same," he said. "Someone could crawl dying to your feet, and you might heal him with a touch of your hand, and then ask for thanks. You rescued me. I didn't ask you to. You can throw me back in the river if you like."

The man stared at him for a long moment. Pheron glared back. He expected the man to pick him up and throw him in the river. It was the kind of thing that Leroth or Hanir would have done, and though he wasn't as bright in coloring, this man resembled them in a lot of other ways. His muscles were all large and perfect, and he wore a sword that glowed with magic and jewels at his side.

Strangely, though, the man just shook his head and hauled Pheron to his feet. "This is a recent wound," he said, taking in the sight of Pheron's stump again.

"Yes."

"And you won't tell me what happened?"

"No."

"I don't know why I'm taking a chance on you," muttered the stranger as he guided Pheron toward a blazing bonfire. "You could be a thief, for all I know, or the most skilled beggar I've ever

seen.”

The daze was falling again. “Hoping to become a beggar,” muttered Pheron. “Not there yet. I don’t know anything about begging. Will you tell me something about it?”

Again, the pause. Then the man said, “Lie down here,” and lowered Pheron to the grass with unexpected gentleness, given all his other words. “I’ll see if I have some clothes that might fit you.”

Pheron shut his eyes and said nothing. The pain had increased to the point that he didn’t think he would stay awake if the man tried to shove him into clothes.

Sure enough, when the large arms began shifting him around, his stump banged into the ground, followed by his ribs, and Pheron passed out.

* * *

He woke freshly clothed, with a bowl of stew not far from his hand, and the bonfire still going, warming his side. Pheron rolled over and saw the stars still above him. The stiffness in his muscles told him he hadn’t slept for just a few hours, though. A whole day, and into the night again, and still his rescuer hadn’t left him.

Very strange.

Pheron was halfway to sitting up before he remembered about the stranger’s aura of Destiny. Then he shook his head and picked up the bowl of stew, carefully balancing it on one knee. Of course it wasn’t strange that a noble like that would stop to help someone else. He could use it to generate satisfaction for himself and tales of his nobility for anyone who asked.

That didn’t stop the stew from being good, though—excellent, in fact. Pheron nodded in understanding as he finished the last of it. This man must be one of the wandering knights-errant who traveled about the Kingdoms righting wrongs. It was the only way that he would have gained that much experience in cooking.

“You’re awake. Good.”

Pheron turned his head, bowing a little as the noble strode into camp. Now that part of the haze was gone from Pheron’s head, he could see just how strong the Destiny was about this man. It hissed like a nest of snakes. He called the deference he had learned around his family back into place. Last night had been a slip. Besides, it would be good practice at begging for him to learn how to address a noble now. “Thank you for rescuing me, my lord.”

“Your manner has changed.” The bluff, hearty voice held a note of suspicion in it.

“I was—not myself last night.”

“Hmmm.” The man sat down on the other side of the fire. His silver eyes were extraordinarily clear, almost the color of starlight or molten metal. He looked as though he could spend all day battling creatures of the Dark and still win out. “My name is Seros, Lord of Gazania. What is your name?”

Pheron didn’t recognize the title but wasn’t surprised. Territories tended to change in wars with the Dark, being destroyed or falling to the creatures of evil or being assigned new names as commemorations after the battle. Some of the older nobility still clung to names that, for the rest of Orlath, had long since passed into oblivion. Gazania was probably called something else now. “Pheron.”

Seros paused almost as if listening for some distant echo, then said, “You have no title.”

“No, my lord.”

“And you won’t tell me how you came by your wound?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s embarrassing,” said Pheron before he could stop himself.

Seros smiled. “I think this is who you are, and I like you the better for it,” he said, clapping Pheron on the shoulder while barely leaning across the fire to do so. Pheron thought he might have been the largest man he had ever seen. “Whither are you bound? I will take you there.”

“Ozue or Corlinth. I need to become a beggar, and my chances are best in a city.”

“I’ve never seen someone so eager to take up the trade of begging,” said Seros mildly. “If one could call it a trade. Why must you?”

Pheron snorted. “I don’t know many trades. Fighting was mine, and—” He held up the stump silently. If he said it himself, it might have too much bitterness in it.

“Ah.”

Seros went back to watching him, while Pheron went back to scraping the bottom of the bowl. In the end, there wasn’t much he could do to sway Seros’s course. The man would do as Pheron had asked or not.

“I will take you to Corlinth,” said Seros at last. “I was going there anyway.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Don’t be surprised if things don’t turn out as you expected.”

Pheron again answered before he could stop himself. “I’ve tried to keep myself from having expectations. They refuse to listen to me.”

This time, Seros laughed.

Chapter Thirteen

The Royalty of Queens

“There is only true royalty in those who follow the full promise of their noble blood. One could be the greatest prince or princess in the world and still not amount to anything. If you fail the promise of your potential, then it does not matter what else you do. You will always be less than you could have done, and you will hurt because of it.”

—From Thayer Trenton’s Promises of Royalty.

Emmeldra remained calm as the gray dragon flew with her over the Corlirin Plains, wings spreading and beating and falling so fast that the dragon’s body rocked. The great beast wouldn’t drop her. She wouldn’t be crushed by the talons in a moment of careless excitement. The Destiny wouldn’t allow that. Destiny had a different end in mind for her.

The gray dragon flapped again, and mountains seemed to spring into being on the horizon. Emmeldra blinked. Had they come to the Rashar Range that quickly? She hadn’t realized how fast dragons flew.

The dragon canted to the side, and Emmeldra blushed as the wind tossed her dress up around her legs. Of course, they were probably too high for anyone to see her undergarments.

“You are the Princess Emmeldra, I trust?”

If the dragon hadn't held her so firmly, Emmeldra would have fallen. She glanced around wildly, almost expecting to see a dark alfar riding a pegasus beside her or something of the kind. But the voice spoke again, chiding her, and she tilted her head back and swallowed. The voice had come from above her, and the rumble in the dragon's chest confirmed her suspicion.

It was the dragon who spoke.

"Confirm your name," said the dragon. "If I have the wrong princess, then I will drop you."

"No," said Emmeldra, all her certainties about Destiny suddenly fading. If dragons could talk, perhaps she could die in a fall to the grass of the Corlirin. "I am the Princess Emmeldra, twin sister to Prince Hanir, and heir of the blood of Queen Aneron."

"Twin of Prince Hanir," said the dragon, slowly, thoughtfully, in the manner of someone confirming something she had already known. Emmeldra shook her head. Dragons weren't people, and it was the beginning of insanity to think so. "Yes, I thought that was so. And you have a younger brother, Prince Leroth, as well?"

"Yes."

"And you are betrothed to Prince Lightflower of the Kingdom of Doralissa?"

"Yes." With all the answers she gave, Emmeldra found herself growing more confident again. Even the dragons had heard of her, though it was certainly a surprise that they could talk. Even the animal world knew of the wonder of Orlath and the Destinies that its royal family wielded in the war against the Dark. "And he is the one who will kill you for your insolence in taking me."

"Insolence?" The dragon rumbled again, and this time Emmeldra thought it was meant to be laughter, rather than just the pressure of speaking. "I suppose that one might call it that, though I wouldn't. You don't know why I snatched you from your escort, do you?" it added in a sudden change of subject.

"It is my Destiny."

"Well, partially that," said the dragon and then suddenly ceased to beat its wings and dove, so sharply that Emmeldra screamed and clutched at the talons.

"You don't need to scream," said the dragon in her ear. "Perhaps I will have Bloodsinger breathe fire down your throat and steal your vocal cords. It would hardly affect the purpose that I need you for, since I can read your mind as well as having you speak the truths to me that I need to hear."

Emmeldra fell silent, stared up at the peaks that loomed toward them like teeth eager to bite through the dragon's wings, and wondered at Destiny's purpose in allowing this to happen.

The dragon leveled out so close above the peaks that Emmeldra couldn't see how it managed. It turned almost a somersault and snapped up as if sitting on its haunches. Emmeldra wondered why, then saw a boulder tear past her, smashing into the side of the ravine that opened up before them. There was a dangerous downdraft.

"Lucky for you that I can see patterns so well," said the dragon, again sounding amused, and then dove. They passed into the ravine, and Emmeldra fought not to be sick as they twisted back and forth along the curving passage between the cliffs. How embarrassing, if the Crown Princess of Orlath was sick from a little dragonhandling!

The gray dragon rolled and then loosed a roar that made Emmeldra wince, as it always did. Such a rage-filled sound, as if the dragon could kill all the deer in the world and never be satisfied.

Another cry came in answer from ahead, and suddenly the air seemed to turn to light. Emmeldra stared around with dropping jaw as the dragon's wings pushed light instead of air

aside. The blue color of the sky was deepening as well, from pale sweet cerulean to a color that more closely resembled that of a fine night sapphire.

The dark blue cascaded past her, and Emmeldra felt a brief moment of frozen stiffness, as though she were being imprisoned underwater. Before she could even fight to breathe, though, the stiffness passed, and the gray dragon hung with her in the midst of what could have been an enormous jewel.

Facets above them, facets below, and facets all around. Emmeldra knew they must really be in a cave of some kind, but that didn't keep it from looking like a jewel. Everywhere she looked, there was light, including flashes from what seemed to be diamonds or sapphires embedded in the walls of the great gem, producing beams that cut at her eyes like swords. The gray dragon's reflection rippled mistily in the "walls," along with her own. Emmeldra looked down, trying to do it without being sick.

Below her was a long channel that looked as if a river might once have run in it, if such things were possible in the midst of a jewel. The dragon floated down toward the channel, backwinging furiously, and landed in the middle of it, setting Emmeldra on the jewel beside the channel.

As the dragon settled itself, curving its head around its flank and scratching at its left ear with enormous talons, Emmeldra whirled and tried to run.

Immediately, the pressing stiffness came back. The dragon's mild voice said in the same moment, "Don't try that again. You'll never get back through the light without help."

"What is this place?" Emmeldra demanded, turning back. The pressure eased at once. The dragon appeared to have settled itself fully, head resting on the side of the channel, and blinked golden eyes at her.

"Nothing that you would understand. A dragon-place. I will ask the questions."

"What authority do you have to question me?"

The dragon laughed. Emmeldra backed up, covering her ears at the awful sound, but could still hear the beast when it spoke. "You spoke to me of insolence, I believe, and now I see why that word sprang so easily to your mind and lips. You have a large store of it yourself. I am Cloudshadow, Dragon Queen, and that should be answer enough."

"Dragons don't have Queens."

"You read only your own biased histories," answered Cloudshadow, "which causes a lot of trouble. In fact, it caused a lot of this trouble in the first place." She turned to the side and snapped her tail down on the side of the channel. A ripple seemed to travel through the gem, accompanied by a ringing noise like that of a great iron bell. Emmeldra clapped her hands over her ears more firmly; even though the noise wasn't unpleasant, it was loud. A book rested in Cloudshadow's talons when she looked back, and the dragon pawed opened the cover with practiced delicacy.

"Dragons are vicious beasts," Cloudshadow read. "They do not recognize authority, or the Cycle, or anything save their own needs to eat and kill and destroy." She shook her head. "At first, I was only amused. But the more I read, the more I came to realize that those of the Light think of my people with contempt. Hatred would have been fine, but contempt? When we can smash a human without stopping to breathe? No, this will not do."

"You've taken me because of your anger about a book?" Emmeldra could hardly conceive of it. Dragons were outside the Cycle, and thus it was possible that they might do something to interfere with Destiny. But pique over a book seemed such an incredibly petty motivation that Emmeldra didn't want to think about it. "I demand you send me back at once," she said, raising

her chin.

“No,” said Cloudshadow. “And one more demand, and I promise you that you will feel all the blood rushing out of your head at once. It’s not a very pleasant sensation. I want to know what your prophecy is, the prophecy that you were born with, and which it is your Destiny to fulfill.”

Emmeldra smiled. What they said was true. Even dragons were servants of Destiny. This self-proclaimed Dragon Queen would hear her words and realize how important they were and would take her back with apologies. The dragons might even come into the war on the side of the Light. “This is the prophecy that was given to me ten years ago:

*“Where the seagulls wheel,
There below the sounding stone
Waits the green-eyed destiny,
And you must come to this alone.
Where the ravens flap and cry,
Alone you will stand, between sea and sky,
And the Light will flare in the white fire,
And then you shall come to the end of desire.”*

The Dragon Queen nodded her head but didn’t look terribly impressed. “And do you know what any of those lines mean?”

“The first is a cliff above the Lilitha Ocean.”

Cloudshadow tilted her head to the side and let a tongue so snake-like come out that Emmeldra jumped back in instinctive disgust. “Interesting,” she said. “Bloodsinger! Do you think that you can find that cliff?”

Emmeldra relaxed. Everything really would go just as she had thought it would. Bloodsinger would find this cliff, and he would see the marks of Destiny, and he would come back with such glowing tales that the Queen would change her allegiance to the Light, and her people would change with her.

“Easily,” said a red dragon, sticking his head through the wall. There didn’t appear to be a hole. A facet just melted back, and there was his head. “Do you think it has anything to do with the spy?”

“What spy?” asked Emmeldra, horrified to think that her mother could be using dishonorable means to try and rescue her.

“Bloodsinger encountered a man he could smell but not see beside the Terrana,” said Cloudshadow. “We thought that you might have come up with some way to evade our sight.”

“No.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Cloudshadow with mockery in her voice that Emmeldra didn’t understand. What could there be to mock at? “Then I will send Bloodsinger to seek out your cliff, and you and I will wait here until your prince, whichever one that is, comes for you.”

“He will. He will not fail.”

Cloudshadow tilted her head to the side and let her tongue hang forth again. Emmeldra wondered what that gesture was supposed to mean.

Chapter Fourteen

Hopes

*"Hope comes winging down when you can't walk another step."
—Aloros of Gazania.*

"Careful. It gets rough here."

Pheron curved his arm around Seros's waist and clung firmly as they splashed across the river. The horse, which Seros called Kablash, snorted a little, as if he found the extra weight combined with the wet stones of the ford distressing, but they were across too quickly for Pheron to worry about the beast.

"And there is your first glimpse of Corlinth."

Pheron lifted his eyes to the north.

He wasn't sure what he had expected to see. Perhaps a glorified castle, like the capital of Doralissa or his own family's stronghold, or at most a keep with a village surrounding it, such as so many of the Orlathian nobles lived in. But this was altogether different.

High walls towered into the air. Pheron's eyes grew tired following them up. Large gates loomed in the middle of them, and he could just see the tops of towers beyond. The whole city caught the first light of the rising sun and flashed with dazzling power. Pheron caught his breath, only realizing then that the stone of the walls and buildings was gold in color.

"You approve of it?" Seros asked in an amused voice.

Pheron supposed that he must look a fool, gaping at a relatively ordinary sight, but he didn't care. He couldn't close his mouth, and he couldn't take his eyes from the gleam. It meant hope to him, in a way that the rising sun never had back home. He found that he could dream of a future in this place, for the first time in his life.

"Yes," said Pheron. "I do. It looks like home."

Seros glanced back at him. Pheron could feel it, even though he didn't take his eyes off the city to actually meet the man's glance. "You come from such a city, then?"

Pheron shook his head, still not looking away from Corlinth, though this time he allowed a smile to touch his lips. Seros had been relentless in his efforts to find out more about him. It was the most gentle and yet the most rigorous interrogation that Pheron had ever undergone. He had let a few things slip by accident, but nothing on purpose, and nothing at all once he realized where Seros's questions were tending. He was sure that someone would come after him, and he didn't want Seros involved. "That has nothing to do with it looking like home," he said. "It seems as though I will be able to make a home here."

He shifted, uncoiling his arm from Seros's waist and starting to slide to the ground. Kablash snorted and stamped, and Pheron found himself dangling halfway down.

"What are you doing?"

Pheron gave his rescuer an embarrassed smile. "Sorry about that. I'm going to have to practice climbing down more."

"Where are you going?" Seros's dark brows knit, giving him the aspect of an angered giant. "You've reached Corlinth, and now you're going to walk away from it? You have a gift for ambushing yourself."

"No," said Pheron. "I was going to make my way in."

"On foot?"

Pheron raised an eyebrow. "You have the horse."

"I will ride with you into the city," said Seros, tightening Kablash's reins as the gelding tried to lower his head and eat the luxurious grass, which petered out toward the city walls. Kablash lifted his head and almost sighed. "This was not just a courtesy journey; I told you that. I have business of my own in Corlinth."

"But you'll be going toward the nobles' section, won't you, my lord?" The title came awkwardly to Pheron's lips. He had gotten used to not calling Seros that, but it was time to practice the politeness that was part of a beggar's arsenal.

"Yes. What of it?" Seros's voice turned gruff, and this time his grip on the reins was so tight that Kablash tossed his head in protest. Seros loosened his grip and patted the horse's neck in apology but never removed his gaze from Pheron's face. Pheron was beginning to find it a bit unnerving.

"That is a very different section of the city from the part where I will go to beg," said Pheron quietly. "Better that we should part ways now."

"Why are you so determined to escape me?"

Pheron hesitated, then sighed. The demands of conscience said that he should at least give Seros a vague warning of what was coming, even though he couldn't give him specifics. "It is not escaping, my lord. But danger will come after me. Enemies, I think, even though I tried my best to part ways with them quietly. And I don't want you caught up in a battle that is none of yours."

Seros studied him. His silver eyes were more intense than ever, and Pheron wasn't sure why. "What kind of enemies?"

"My family."

"They are of the Dark?"

Pheron laughed before he could help himself. "No," he said quickly, aware that Seros might be offended by his laughter, especially since Pheron couldn't explain completely. "Very much of the Light."

"And why are they chasing you?"

Pheron took a chance, hoping that it was honestly in order to answer his conscience, and not for the more unworthy goal of easing his loneliness. "A quarrel." He shifted so that Seros could see his stump again. "My brother cut off my arm."

Seros caught his breath, and Pheron was startled to see tears in his eyes, rather than disgust. Most Orlathian nobles would have assumed that, if he quarreled with a family who was loyal to the Light and got his arm cut off as a result, then he deserved it. "That is hard," he said. "Did he do it for a good reason?"

"He probably thinks so, my lord." Pheron was astonished to feel himself grinning again. Well, good. If he could learn to laugh at the circumstances that would make him beg, then perhaps he wasn't going to turn into a wailing, puling boy like Leroth after all. "I don't, of course."

Seros continued to gaze at him intently for a while, then jerked his head. "Get up behind me again," he said. "At least I can give you one night at an inn in Corlinth. The wines of the city have to be tasted to be believed."

"With all due thanks for your kindness, my lord, no. It wouldn't be best."

"And why not?"

"It would be good for me to get used to my new life as soon as possible. I won't pretend to

you that it's going to be very different. I was—privileged before.” He hadn't felt that way at the time, but surely, he thought, having food to eat was a privilege if one was a beggar. “I don't think that a night at an inn in Corlinth, one that I will not be able to afford again, will help to settle me into my new life.”

Seros reached down and hauled him into the saddle. Pheron went with him more out of surprise than anything else. In seconds, he was firmly settled, and they were galloping toward the gate.

“My lord—”

“Quiet,” said Seros, with the first sign of a commanding snap in his voice that Pheron had heard. “I have to think.”

Pheron was glad enough to fall silent and watch the gates loom higher and higher. He already regretted saying as much as he had. It might not be enough to let Seros guess where he came from, but it could be enough to involve him in the pursuit. Pheron didn't want Seros fighting his family, or, even worse, learning the truth and feeling that Pheron had betrayed him and the Light.

The walls and gates continued to soar, assuming their full height only when Kablash was about three hundred horse-lengths from them. Pheron tilted back his head. This close, he could just barely see the towers. His curiosity increased when he noted that buckets hung every few feet from the merlons. What would they need those for? To tip down boiling oil on enemies? The Dark hadn't attacked the fortified cities of Orlath in a long time, preferring to march across open areas like the Corlirin and burn the more vulnerable small keep and villages.

One guardsman pacing the battlements seized a bucket and tilted it, spilling out the liquid in it, then filled it with a glittering stream of new liquid. Pheron squinted. He couldn't be sure, but both kinds of liquid, the emptied-out and the put-in, seemed to be ordinary water.

“Dragon attacks.”

Pheron started and almost slid off the saddle. “What?” he asked.

“Dragon attacks,” said Seros, and Pheron saw that he was looking up at the high walls as well, with an expression on his face that Pheron couldn't quite define. “Water to quench the fires, and thick walls in hopes of staving off the breath of the thorn dragons. Corlinth suffered dragon attack after dragon attack until they learned.”

“The dragons just gave up?” Pheron had a hard time reconciling that image of dragons to the one by the river, where the red dragon had breathed fire even when he couldn't be sure that there was anyone there.

“No,” said Seros. “But they decided to go after easier targets. They could wait, after all.”

There was a tone of amusement in his voice that Pheron wanted to ask about, but the guards stepped forward then and spoke, their voices echoing like trumpets. Pheron winced. There must be a Gust mage somewhere nearby who was bending the winds so that everyone within a mile could hear the guards' voices.

“Who comes to the gates of Corlinth?”

“Lord Seros of Gazania,” Seros said, controlling Kablash, who had shied at the sound of the trumpet-voice, without even pausing. “I have brought a young man by the name of Pheron with me.”

“My lord!” This voice was normal, and a small door in the foot of the wall that Pheron hadn't noticed before opened up. A tall woman dressed in leather stepped out, nodding to Pheron absently but fixing her eyes with real eagerness on Seros' face. “We expected you yesterday. The Conclave is gathering.”

The Conclave?

"I would have been here yesterday, but I needed to tend to this poor lost waif." He nodded to Pheron, who tried to hold his head up under the gaze of pity the woman gave him. He would have to learn to bear it, Pheron told himself. The crippling had exiled him from the realm of ordinary people. There was no way to reverse it.

"Your kind heart will be the doom of you, Seros," said the woman.

For some reason, Seros seemed to find this incredibly funny, even though the woman had spoken with dry wit at most and hadn't used his title. He laughed so hard that Pheron was forced to cling even harder, and at last Seros sputtered to a halt from lack of breath. "Funny as always, Deniessa," he said. "Pheron, this is Deniessa, a contact of mine here in Corlinth."

Pheron nodded back, certain that the guard must have helped in Seros's adventures in the past. Probably could right wrongs with the best of them. Destiny hissed around her, too. She would have to be strong on the side of the Light.

Deniessa grinned at Seros, then drew herself up and intoned swift words. "My Lord Pheron, we bid you welcome to the City of Hope. Before you enter, I must know: are you carrying any weapon? The city-laws will require you to peace-bond it if you are."

Pheron shook his head.

"I've searched him," said Seros. "Nothing, not so much as a belt-knife."

"And," continued Deniessa, "do you have any disease?"

"No, my lady."

"And are you an elemental mage?"

Pheron shook his head again.

Deniessa's eyes narrowed for the first time. "Yet you do have magic," she said. "The clothes you wear are of noble cut, and all nobles have magic. Please show us what it is." Though Pheron didn't glance up, he was sure that the guards on the battlements had started gripping their weapons the more tightly.

He sighed and held out his hand. "This is all," he said and called the ball of clay.

Seros turned slightly to see what he could do and froze, staring at the clay. Deniessa looked stupefied. Pheron glanced from one to the other and had the feeling that he had just made a very large mistake.

Chapter Fifteen

Hopes and Suspicions

"The Light and the Dark are two opposing forces. Never make the mistake of thinking they can be forced together; or, worse, that you can reason with the Dark. I promise you, you cannot. To try and reason with the Dark, and talk its creatures out of causing destruction, is the highest of follies, since they have no reason, and no moral sense."

—From Yemor Trenton's Wonders of the World.

"You are sure, Leroth?"

Leroth kept his eyes on the glass of warming wine as he nodded. He didn't think that he could glance up and meet his mother's gaze at the moment. He would see doubt or tormented pain, and either of them would make him cry. He had wept enough before they managed to cut him out of the web that people were actually making remarks on it.

For once, he didn't want to weep aloud. He could cry the tears inside, and they would be just as sincere, just as meaningful, just as real.

"Why would he do this?" whispered Queen Annilda, and stood up to pace across to the window. Leroth turned his head just slightly to watch her, now that he was sure he wouldn't meet her eyes. The Queen was clad in a white gown and a silver mantle that shone like foam on the sea.

Foam on the sea...

His mermaid love...

Leroth blinked and turned back to his wine. A tear fell from his cheek into the cup. Well, that would make it the better, and he would drink the mingled sweetness and salt together.

"My own son," said Annilda.

"Sons, Mother."

Annilda turned back. Leroth kept his eyes firmly fixed on the wine. "Yes, that's right," she said. "I had forgotten that Pheron was involved in this as well. He always seemed the kind to turn to the Dark, and so I didn't require a lot of time to fit my mind around that suspicion." She sighed. "But Prince Hanir..."

"He killed Lord Quillon," Leroth reminded her.

"He claimed that Lord Quillon was of the Dark."

"It may have been to cover his own crimes," said Leroth.

"Well, he did claim that the Lord had attacked a young girl who worked on his estate." Annilda sighed again. "I've sent to the kitchens to find the girl, but she seems to have vanished after Hanir. Pursuing a doomed or a Destined romance, I suppose." There was a smile in her voice for a moment.

Leroth reminded his mother of what was important, quickly. "Mother. Hanir betrayed you. And he is of the Dark, and he killed a loyal man, and Pheron is in league with him and tied me up so that I couldn't go after Emmeldra."

"I didn't want you to go after Emmeldra."

Leroth bowed his head. "But I'm the Destined prince," he said. "I'm the one who should be rescuing my sister and living life free and strong while I'm at it."

His mother sighed a third time. "Yes. I remember how hard it is, Leroth, to bear the burden of Destiny. My sister and your father fell to the Dark. It is hard, to stand strong in the face of it." For a moment, she was silent. "But I cannot simply declare you heir of Orlath without more proof than this. Pheron has always been Dark, most likely, but it might be only a coincidence that he left at the same moment that Hanir did and prevented you from leaving. I will need more proof."

"What proof will you accept?" Leroth asked.

"I will ask Elle."

Leroth smiled in approval. He had thought that his mother might, Light forbid, try to track down Hanir and Pheron and get answers from them. All she would get would be more lies and double-talk. But going to the goddess was the right thing to do. "I will go with you to the temple," he said, drinking his wine and setting it down.

Queen Annilda's hand fell on his shoulder, and Leroth looked up to meet her eyes for the

first time. They were the pale ice-blue that he had seen only in moments of extreme anger, such as when Pheron said something stupid. “You are to come with me in silence and not speak the names of either of your brothers,” she said.

“But, Mother, the goddess favors me.”

“We must see if she will truly convict your brothers or not, without any outside help from your Destiny. I understand that your Destiny is of the Light, but so is Hanir’s. If he has fallen to the Dark and managed to fool everyone so far, then I want the goddess to tell me so. He may have been influenced by Pheron into doing a wrong thing.”

Leroth nodded once. Truly, he remembered the half-crazed look in Hanir’s eyes and thought that his mother was behaving irresponsibly, out of her vain hope that Hanir wasn’t in league with the Dark, but the goddess would set her straight.

His mother squeezed his shoulder. Then she turned and left the room, walking down the hall that connected the royal wing to the rest of the palace with the grace that her twins had inherited. Leroth followed her, though he found himself glancing at closed doors as he passed. A curiosity he couldn’t quite admit to aloud stirred in his breast.

Was it true, what Pheron had said?

Did he truly have no room in the royal wing?

Leroth thought, in a way, that it made sense. After all, someone who had fallen to the Dark couldn’t stand to be around people who spoke of the Light all the time and radiated Light in their Destinies. But if he was telling the truth about sharing a room with the huge spider—Leroth shuddered—then it seemed odd that he would choose a dusty, humble place to sleep. He could have mastered his disgust and remained in the royal wing, so that he would have more details to report to his Dark masters.

“Are you coming, Leroth?”

Leroth looked up and saw his mother already far ahead. He shook his mind free of the distracting thoughts and hurried to catch up. It didn’t really matter if Pheron was telling the truth or not. Besides, even if he was, of course he would choose to sleep in the same room as a spider, a creature of evil.

Pheron was Dark and always had been.

* * *

“Here we are.”

Leroth let out a breath of reverence and sank to one knee as he watched his mother kneel before the statue of the goddess. Because he hadn’t come as her supplicant, he could look about him and admire the marble perfection of the walls, the roses growing everywhere, the flowing water.

A seagull feather lay in a corner of the temple, and Leroth nodded to it, eyes growing misty as he thought of the feather that had led him to find his love...was it really only the evening before yesterday?

Well, two days ago he had not known the full extent of his tragic Destiny, and Emmeldra had not yet been taken by a dragon, and he hadn’t yet learned Hanir was in league with the Dark, and he hadn’t yet cut off Pheron’s arm. There was a lot that could change in two days.

Leroth bowed his head. His mother whispered something, but he couldn’t tell what it was. The moon wheeled across the sky, not quite full but still beautiful, and Leroth strained his ears, almost thinking that he heard some whisper of the goddess riding the light.

“Elle!”

Leroth looked up in shock. His mother had spoken so loudly that the peaceful, contemplative mood of the temple was broken. Queen Annilda was on her feet and backing away from the statue of the goddess, shaking her head as if she couldn’t bear whatever it was that Elle had told her.

“What is it, Mother?” asked Leroth, just barely remembering to whisper as he sprang up and made his way to her side.

Annilda stood for a long moment looking at the statue with clear eyes that, Leroth thought, were filled almost with loathing. Then she turned to him and said, “She told me that Hanir is not in league with the Dark, but—” She sighed. “He cannot rule Orlath. Nor can Emmeldra. That means that I must proclaim you Heir.”

Leroth bowed his head, feeling his eyes tear again before the honor, unexpected in so many ways, anticipated in so many others. He had always kept the possibility that he was best-suited to rule Orlath in the back of his mind. He had just not known for sure that his mother would have to declare him Heir.

“I am glad that Hanir is not in league with the Dark,” he whispered.

“No, he is not,” said Annilda. “But Pheron is.”

Leroth sighed and let the tears drip down his cheeks. Again, it was not unexpected, but the burden of the sudden confirmation was heavy, both for him and for his mother.

“You will hunt him down, then?”

His mother didn’t answer, and Leroth looked up and into her eyes.

It was most strange. For just one moment, he thought he caught a glimpse of something deeper there, something that revealed the depth of his mother’s soul. Then Annilda turned her head away from him and stared across the marble courtyard and nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “And because I must remain here and deal with affairs of state, and Hanir is hunting after the dragon that took your sister, I want you to lead the hunt, Leroth.”

Leroth bowed. “I will kill him, Mother.”

“No,” said Annilda. “It must be done properly. Bring him back, alive, and we will let Elle judge him.” She glanced back at the marble statue, still with that strange expression of doubt in her eyes. “She knows best.”

“A perfect solution, Mother.”

“Yes, it will have—”

Screams sounded from outside, and cries of, “The Dark! The Dark!” Leroth started and ran toward them. His mother was right beside him, her steps stern and straight.

The cries had altered by the time they came into the courtyard, not changing tone—though they grew keener in their terror—but changing words.

“Dragon! Dragon!”

Leroth watched in dread as the dragon winged past overhead. There wasn’t really enough light by the stars and moon to see what color the beast was, but from the general pointed shape of the head, he thought it probably breathed fire. It wheeled over the castle, loosing that horrible death-rattle roar, its wings tearing the air like great shears, and then turned and flew toward the sea. Leroth strained his eyes. He had the best sight in the castle, and he could see that the dragon was hunting along the sea-cliffs, head turning from side to side as if looking for something.

“What is it doing?” asked his mother.

“I can’t tell—”

Wham.

His words were silenced in instants. The dragon had lashed out with its tail, and as Leroth watched in shock, bits of stone fell into the sea. Then it drew in breath, and by the fire that followed, Leroth could see that it was indeed a red, a dragon of the Scarlet. It hovered in midair, terrible and awful, hammering the rock with breath and tail until it crumbled into the sea.

Then it whirled and flew back the way it had come, west and north.

Leroth turned a blank face to his mother. "What was that all about?"

Queen Annilda shook her head. She knew no more than he did why a dragon would fly into a territory of the Light merely to destroy a stretch of uninhabited cliff. But her face was already clearing as she turned to him, and Leroth knew that she was putting it from her mind.

"You will leave at dawn," she said. "Your brother shall not escape his crimes. Take the hunt toward the Rashar Range. He may have fled to the protection of the dragons or the goblins."

Leroth bowed to her. "You need not fear, Your Majesty," he said, using the formal title, since it was such a formal moment. "I will bring my traitorous brother to justice."

Chapter Sixteen

Mistakes

"It's never a mistake to run away when in trouble—except for the times when it is a mistake, of course."

—The Mistaken Mage.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Deniessa asked, her voice so soft that Pheron doubted he would have heard it if he hadn't been listening with all his might.

Bells rang in Pheron's head. He swallowed. "I was born knowing how to do it. It's the only magic I have. Can I pass now? Surely the ability to call a ball of clay isn't dangerous to Corlinth."

"But what it implies could be." Seros's words were almost fragile. Glancing at him, though, Pheron thought the expression in his eyes reflected excitement more than anything else. *Of course*, Pheron thought as he tensed. Probably the excitement of bringing a runaway, someone he would have to think of as Dark, to justice. "Tell me, who were your parents?"

"My father was a Crop mage who fell to the Dark," said Pheron, tensing himself even further, ready to leap if necessary. "My mother is an Azure mage."

"I should have known from the beginning," said Seros. "After all, your name is not very common either, is it? You are Prince Pheron of Orlath, the one without a Destiny."

Pheron let out a breath. His heart pounded in his ears so hard it placed a film of red around the edges of his sight. "I am Pheron of Orlath. I have not claimed the title of Prince and never will." If Seros and Deniessa handed him back to his family, to hear that he had claimed any kind of title would displease his mother greatly.

"Your family is hunting you," said Seros, his voice rising steadily. "And your brother cut off your arm. That would have to mean that one of the princes of Orlath cut off your arm. Why did he do that?"

Pheron wasn't staying to tell him. No matter what he said, he could never make Seros or Deniessa see and understand it as he did. He was the one in the wrong, automatically. He had understood that from the day he realized just what it meant – to never have a Destiny or elemental magic.

"You have done me a great service by bringing me to Corlinth," he said, digging his legs into Kablash's sides. The gelding shifted, but Pheron didn't think that was enough to alert Seros. "I wish that there was something I could do to repay you, but I don't have any money at all. You would have found it when you searched me."

"Come with me to the Mermaid's Rest," said Seros, and his eyes still shone with that intensity that reminded Pheron more of excitement than anything else. "We have a great deal to talk about."

"Truly," agreed Deniessa and stepped forward.

Pheron wasn't fooled. They would arrest him or something of the kind. There would be no simple "talking." There never was.

He tossed the ball of clay precisely forward. Deniessa stepped on it and slipped, taken so by surprise that she flailed and fell to the ground.

Pheron leaped off Kablash in the same instant, ignoring Seros's startled oath and reaching. The Lord of Gazania had to spend more time controlling his madly rearing gelding, anyway, and by the time that he succeeded, Pheron had ducked through the small door that Deniessa had left open behind her.

He caught a glimpse of looming walls and a small alley that twisted out between them, and he ran. Behind him, he could hear confused shouts. If the other guards knew what had happened to Seros and Deniessa, they didn't seem to have realized what all the other implications were, that a prisoner was escaping.

Save that I am no prisoner, Pheron thought as he ducked around a corner and found himself in yet another alley, part of a twisting maze between the looming walls. Bitterness boiled in his throat, and the hot dark thing that had awakened on the beach when Leroth cut him was back again, whispering harsh thoughts in his mind. *I don't deserve to be a prisoner. What I did, I did on accident. But they won't ever listen to that, and I can't convince them.*

He tilted his head to the side and listened. There was still no pursuit that he could hear, just the distant shouts. He looked around, trying to find some way out of the alley, and grimaced. There were balconies high above him, high enough to look out over the city, but the walls that led up to them were smooth stone. With one arm, he'd never climb them.

And his stump was bleeding again, and his ankle, somewhat spared by the day of riding, hurt.

Pheron sighed and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and wondered if he wouldn't be better advised to go back and surrender. At least the jail cell was less likely to be rough than the night streets of a city he didn't know. Though he hadn't visited Ozue or Corlinth, Pheron had heard all the stories.

Shouts.

There were people coming after him, though only a few. Pheron supposed the guards had split up and gone to scout out other streets, the better to catch him wherever he might run.

Disgust welled up in him, and once again he wondered what indignity would come about from just surrendering and letting them haul him off to a cell.

"Because I haven't done anything wrong," he whispered and crouched, listening as the shouts drew closer. He might not be able to do much, but this much he could do. He could force

them to kill him instead of just walking forward and letting them put the manacles on his arms—well, arm and stump, he amended.

He had yielded for too long, letting his family do and think and say whatever they liked, letting people stare at him with glances of pity. They could pity him for having only one arm, but he wasn't about to yield to hatred for something he hadn't done.

The first runner came around the corner. Seros. Pheron narrowed his eyes and judged the distance, seeing that the huge noble hadn't yet drawn his sword, though his hand was resting on the hilt.

One hand on the hilt, one hand stretched out as if he were about to plead with Pheron to surrender like a good little repentant Darkworker. Both hands occupied, and Pheron noticed that his balance was off between one stride and the next. Wearing a sword that heavy had its disadvantages.

"Pheron, I don't care about what you've done."

Of course he didn't, Pheron thought as he called another ball of clay and threw. This one landed beneath Seros's left foot between one stride and another, and he yelped and fell, just like Deniessa. He wouldn't be down for nearly as long, given that he hadn't hit his head, but Pheron nerved himself and ran toward the Lord of Gazania, instead of away from him.

"Will you listen to me?" Seros said, panting.

Pheron whipped his hand forward and found the dagger that Seros kept on his belt to cut his meat. Not much of a weapon, but it would do. Pheron tugged it free and leaped back just as Seros sat up again and tried to grip his arm.

"It's not what you think," said Seros. "I haven't come to arrest you and drag you back to jail."

"No," said Pheron, taking a step further back and eyeing the noble's reach and weight. Seros had the advantage; there was no question there. He would have had the advantage even if Pheron had two good arms. But Pheron thought he could give a good accounting of himself. "You've come to kill me and get in good with the Queen."

"No," said Seros softly. "The last thing I want is for the Queen to notice me."

Pheron snorted and rolled his eyes. "So you're a rogue noble. I think there are much worse things to be. I've been some of them." He took a step backward, looking for a good place to throw the dagger. Seros wasn't wearing armor, but he was wearing a thick surcoat that would defeat the relatively dull blade.

"Not a rogue noble," said Seros, and this time he got fully to his feet. Pheron danced back again. Seros made no move to come after him, just gazing at him with intense silver eyes instead. "I'm not a noble of Orlath at all, or I should have known your story and taken you back to the castle the moment I rescued you."

"So you're from Doralissa. Or Rivendon. Or some other place where they're bound to follow their Destinies off cliffs. You'll think I'm part of the Dark, even though I'm not."

"No," said Seros. "I don't think you're of the Dark. Far from it." He paused. "In fact, that was one of the reasons that I came after you, instead of just letting you run away and become a beggar, as you seemed so determined to become."

"Because you see some good in me and want to redeem me?"

"No," said Seros. "Because I know you're not part of the Dark, and I came to ask you if you'd like to be."

Pheron stared at him. In the moment of his stupefaction, Seros lunged forward, snatched the dagger away from him, and then shoved Pheron against the wall, the dagger against his

neck.

Pheron closed his eyes. "Get on with it."

"You give up far too easily. Did you really think that I would go to all the trouble of bringing you to Corlinth and hunting you down, and then kill you?"

"To get in good with the Light or the Dark. I don't really care. I'm not a part of either." Pheron concentrated on thinking of one of the few things he had liked about his home, the Lilitha Ocean and how it looked when it bore foam to the shore. He had always believed it would be better to die thinking of something pleasant. "Kill me, if you're going to kill me."

"Turn around." Seros lifted the blade from his throat.

Pheron spent a moment gaining his breath and hope back, and confirming that no, he hadn't really wet himself, before he obeyed.

Seros held out a flap of his surcoat. On it was stitched a heavy symbol in clumsy, dark thread. The stitching went ill with the rest of Seros's clothes.

Pheron frowned as he examined it. It was an image of a dragon in flight, wings spread wide as though it were gliding. A circle loomed beyond the dragon. It might have been meant to represent the rising sun. A sharp shape that might represent a mountain peak was also behind the dragon, though more to the side than the disk.

"What does that mean?" Pheron asked. "I've never seen it before."

"If I give you the answer, I require your secrecy and your silence," said Seros tightly. "More lives than just mine ride on what I would reveal to you by telling you about this symbol."

Pheron sighed. "I don't want to know that badly. Can you leave me here, and I will make my way to the poorer section of the city?"

"No."

The voice came from behind him. Pheron turned sharply. Deniessa stood there, smiling slightly as she met his gaze. She put her hand up to the back of her head and rubbed with what Pheron felt sure was exaggerated pain.

"You dealt me a strong blow there and with just a ball of clay," she said. "I am almost frightened to see what would happen if you had stronger magic. You are resourceful and quick to react. Those are all qualities that we need in those who would become members of the Conclave."

"Compliments are nice, but they don't soothe me," said Pheron. "I heard them from traitors who wanted to get close to Queen Annilda, after all. What do you want from me?"

"An evening—or day—with wine in the Mermaid's Rest," Seros said. Pheron glanced back at him and saw that he had let his surcoat fall shut over the dragon symbol. "What I told you I wanted. Of course, now I think we will have more interesting things to discuss." His eyes gleamed like a cataract of molten metal.

"I don't really know what I can say that would be of use to you," said Pheron.

"The secrets of the castle—"

"You can learn from someone other than me. You probably know them already."

Deniessa chuckled. "Don't push him, Seros," she said. "You were reluctant in the same way when we approached you. I think that Prince Pheron—"

"Don't call me that."

"Pheron will want some time to think," she finished smoothly. "Why don't you take him to the Mermaid's Rest and I'll join you in a few hours, when my watch ends?"

"That's a good idea, Deniessa," said Seros and waited until the guardswoman had left before he turned and glanced at Pheron. "There are some things that may surprise you. One thing is that the Dark treats its faithful very well."

“That doesn’t mean I’ll become a Darkworker.”

Seros shrugged and then clucked his tongue. Kablash trotted around the corner, shaking his head as though to express his disgust over not getting to eat any grass. Seros mounted and held out a hand.

Pheron sighed and climbed up behind him.

Chapter Seventeen

He Who Never Makes Mistakes

“Ultimately, nothing is more irritating than someone who never makes mistakes. Are we not all creatures of the Cycle and the goddess, and feeble, fallible creatures at that? Yes, and so we cannot expect perfection. Sometimes we see it, and it makes us grit our teeth, since we know that this is what we should be able to achieve, and are not achieving.”

—From Seyon Ayer’s The Handling of Cycle Descent.

Hanir watched as the last of the flames died, and let his shoulders fall. It had been a long struggle, holding the wild Scarlet back so that Prince Lightflower could perform his miracles, but Hanir had managed it, and in truth, he was proud of the job that he had done.

Prince Lightflower...

Hanir turned to look at Lightflower, shaking his head slightly. Lightflower crouched over a blade of burned grass, weeping tears that turned into diamonds as they touched the ground. He regretted that they had been too late to save some of the grass and flowers that the fire had consumed. Prince Hanir shared the sentiment, but he thought that Lightflower needed to help him and the surviving soldiers of his escort set up camp, instead of weeping over the burned grass. It reminded Hanir of the worst of Leroth’s excesses.

Lightflower stood up and turned around, still staring intently at the blade of grass in his hands. Hanir glanced at it, wondering if there was some clue hidden in it.

Instead, he saw a straight, clean, green blade of grass. He stared at it in silent shock, and then looked up into the prince’s eyes, which shone just as green.

“I did not know that you could heal the land with your tears, my lord,” said Hanir.

“Neither did I,” said Lightflower, and then he turned and began to walk across the burned grass. Hanir followed him, wondering.

The Prince of Doralissa stooped and shook his head, the light of the fire that their men had lit gleaming on his silver-platinum curls. For a long moment, nothing happened. Then a tear slid off his cheek and onto the blackened ground. Hanir braced himself, expecting it to turn into a small diamond, and crush the fragile blades.

Instead, it remained a drop of liquid, though it shone with rainbow hues that Hanir didn’t think were ever worked in any tear. It lay, glittering, on the grass, and then it transformed. In seconds, a radiant sphere of light was bustling about among the grasses, and then green spread from it. It renewed three blades before the sphere vanished.

His breath catching, Hanir glanced at Lightflower. He walked a step further and paused,

letting another tear fall.

The same thing happened. The blades of grass were smaller and shorter than the ones that the Corlirin Plains had worn before the wildfire, but Hanir supposed that didn't matter. They were luxuriant. They were perfect. He could see why Lightflower had earned his name. The Prince of Doralissa was truly the flower of the Light.

Hanir had to admit some jealousy at the thought, but he choked it back. Emmy could have her perfect prince, and he would be happy for her. He knew how she had dreamed of the day and dreaded that her betrothed, like their father, would fall to the Dark. Hanir was glad that she didn't have to worry about that, at least, and he would make sure to tell her that when they met again.

If they met again.

Hanir took a deep breath and shook his head. They would meet again. There were things that he didn't think were quite right, things that he would never have expected. Dragons talking. Usant slain. But he would get used to it.

"You are quiet, my lord."

Hanir glanced sideways at Lightflower. "I was thinking of Emmy."

"Ah." And Lightflower's eyes softened, something that was more human than perfect coming into his face at the thought of Emmeldra. Hanir was glad to see it. He really did love her, enough that he was willing to forsake the pose on the heights of the Light for her. "Tell me something of her. You are her brother and her twin. You must know her well."

"You have seen her soul," said Hanir easily. They had almost reached the fire again, and he didn't think that he wanted the remnants of the soldiers he had ridden out with hearing him talk about Emmy. They wouldn't understand. They would think of a princess the same as other women, or else they would think of her as perfect and start comparing their own common loves to her and coming up unsatisfied, like mortals after a sojourn in the land of the elves. Hanir didn't want that to happen. They had their sphere, and the princes and nobles had theirs. That was the way it was, and the way that it should remain.

"But I don't know much about her, and there is so much that I want to know."

"Such as?"

"What was she like as a child? How did she bear her Destiny?"

Hanir smiled. "Ah, that I can tell you. And I can understand why Emmy didn't speak of it. There are certain things she's absurdly modest about, you know."

"I know," Lightflower said, the low music of his voice stirring a response from the new grass flowering across the Corlirin. Hanir had to look away from him for a moment to watch the miracle happen, dark green flowing in a rush, and when he looked back, Lightflower was merely looking eager. "Let us get something to eat, and then you can tell me of her."

They fetched bowls of stew from the guardsmen and retired into the darkness, into the midst of new-growing grass and moths that danced around Lightflower and now and then brushed against his hands. Lightflower ate but kept his eyes fixed on Hanir. Hanir looked into the distance, toward the Rashar Range, and spoke of the woman they both loved, though in different ways.

"She knew what Destiny was and what it meant at a very young age—I think even before I or Leroth realized what it meant. She knew that she could die, but so long as she defeated the Dark, then she thought it would be worth it to die."

"Did she really know what death meant?" Lightflower asked, his voice low and sweet as the sound of a flute.

“Yes. She had seen her beloved dog die of disease, and she had seen one of the courtiers collapsing of a heart attack in the court, in front of the queen, our mother.”

“How dreadful!” Lightflower pressed a hand to his own heart.

“Yes, they were sights that no child should have to witness, but she emerged from them with a stronger soul and a burning purpose in her eyes. You may not think so, but she was the strongest of us all. And I think that she is still the strongest of all of us, in every way that counts.”

“I think she is strong,” said Lightflower. “And I only hope and pray to Elle that I shall be worthy of her.”

Hanir smiled at him, and for a time they ate in companionable silence, before Hanir prompted, “Will you not tell me of your sister? The Princess Joydancer?”

“Ah, Joydancer.” Lightflower sighed. “There are times I feel I hardly know her at all, Hanir. In many ways she is like Emmeldra but without the warmth that my betrothed still displays. She knows what her Destiny must be and that she gallops toward it without pausing or stopping, and such things have made her a little aloof when she is only with other nobles or Destined princes. It may be that you can melt that ice and make her a passionate lover again.”

“Perhaps.”

But his thoughts wouldn’t stay on the Princess Joydancer, he found, even though he wanted them to. They veered away, and he flushed as the face of a kitchen maid rose in his thoughts.

“My lord?” asked Lightflower. “Are you well?”

“I am well,” said Hanir. “I am finished with my stew, though, and so I think that I will take the bowl back to the guardsmen.” He stood up and suited action to words.

He shook his head as he walked through the now-cool darkness, the heat of the dragon’s fire having diminished at last, a full day after the burning had begun. He wasn’t sure why he had thought of Jienna instead of Joydancer, and he wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to know. His bride would be in Orlath soon. No doubt the rumors of dragons and Dark attacks had delayed the start of the wedding procession, but Destiny would not let them delay forever.

Why couldn’t he look forward to it?

He was so consumed with brooding on it that he almost stepped into someone standing in his path and looking up to watch the stars. “I’m sorry,” he muttered and tried to back out of the way without insulting the other person at the same time.

“Hanir?”

Hanir shivered as the voice he had been dreaming of tumbled through his thoughts. He looked up, and his eyes feasted almost guiltily on Jienna’s bright-eyed beauty.

Why guilty? He hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Jienna?” he asked. “What are you doing here?”

She blushed and clenched her hands in front of her. “I—I couldn’t let you go into danger by yourself,” she murmured. “Not when I had heard there were dragons about snatching people.”

“Jienna, there is nothing that you could have done.”

“I know. But I feel guilty. She is your sister, and you are her twin brother, and you are riding to rescue her.” She looked up, eyes shining with pathos. “I don’t think that I have ever heard of anything more romantic.”

“Her Destined prince is riding to rescue her as well,” said Hanir. “A prince who cries tears that are diamonds and tears that heal the land.” He was surprised to hear the bitterness in his own voice. He was very, very sure that he had gotten past his jealousy of Lightflower. At least, he

had been so sure he had.

Perhaps not.

“You can’t think that he’s more special than you, can you?” asked Jienna and reached up, laying her hand on his cheek. Hanir trembled. There was fire in her touch, even though it didn’t seem as though anything could warm the coil of bitterness and shame in him. She tilted her head to the side, and again the feeling that he had seen her somewhere before came back to him, but it couldn’t nag him out of the satisfaction as Jienna said, very gently, “He is no more special than you. You and he are like twin moons, and both are as bright as the other. In fact, I would say that I have the sun, and Princess Emmeldra the moon.”

“Jienna?”

Her eyes searched his face. “I really shouldn’t be doing this,” she said, voice almost a breath. “You have a betrothed princess coming to see you. And there are other reasons.” She leaned close.

Hanir found himself closing his eyes as they kissed. He wasn’t sure why. After all, he would have wanted to see his first kiss with the woman he loved.

But he didn’t love her, he assured himself as he put out his arms and pulled Jienna into a tight embrace. He loved Joydancer – or at least he was supposed to. Jienna gave a little gasp but didn’t protest the tightness of his hold otherwise, even tilting her head and winding her arms around his neck.

“What is going on here? Is that my sister you’re kissing?”

It was Lightflower’s voice, coming from right behind him. As Hanir turned, Jienna faded from his arms like a shadow, and he was left standing with swollen lips and frantically beating heart, alone in the starlight.

Chapter Eighteen

Healing

“Never name a secret society anything obvious.”

—Attributed to Kleyon Sharrandon of the Black Brotherhood of the Night.

“Here we are. The Mermaid’s Rest.”

Pheron came back to himself with a jolt. He had dozed off and on during the ride, leaning against Seros’ back or supporting himself with a stubborn pride that took more and more out of him each time. He looked up, narrowing his eyes as he saw the sign hanging above the inn.

He could read. That much, his mother had condescended to teach him. But he couldn’t read this sign.

“What language is that?” he asked.

Seros turned so swiftly that Pheron nearly fell off Kablash’s back. “It’s Orlathian,” he said. “Of course it is. Look at it carefully, and you’ll be able to read it—unless you can’t read?” The first hint of arrogance that Pheron had heard from him prickled the edges of those last words.

Pheron shook his head. “I can read Orlathian,” he said, staring at the strange, snake-like

runes that danced along the sign. They rippled and flowed, as though they were eager to get away from his gaze. “But that’s not Orlathian. I don’t know what it is, but it’s not Orlathian.” He had the feeling that he was repeating himself, but considering the pain from his bleeding stump and throbbing ankle, he thought he was allowed.

“Of course it is.”

Seros urged the gelding forward before Pheron could argue. Pheron rolled his eyes and was still. He needed help and rest, and it seemed as though Seros could offer him both. Pheron wasn’t about to anger the man when that was the case.

But it might not always be the case.

Pheron still hadn’t determined that he would stay with the Darkworker.

A Darkworker. Pheron shook his head at the thought. It seemed unnatural. Seros’s Destiny shone around him, and the people they passed as they rode across the stable yard nodded back to him with glowing smiles on their faces. He was more of the Light than anyone Pheron had ever seen. Even his own family received more solemn, admiring stares or bows than the hero-worship looks Seros was getting.

Well, if he played the part of a knight-errant righting wrongs, Pheron thought he might see where that worship came from. After all, riding about the countryside and making everybody listen to sense—as some of the knights-errant Pheron had heard speak put it—was even more romantic than sitting in a castle and waiting for the Dark to rise again in another generation, so that one could battle it.

It made more sense, too. At least on a fast horse, there was a possibility that one could outrun the Dark.

Pheron blinked, then smiled at himself. Well, many things had changed since he left the castle. Why shouldn’t this be one more thing that changed? Why shouldn’t he think irreverent things about the Light and the Dark if he wanted? Queen Annilda had always warned her children that certain thoughts would lead them to be contemptuous of both Light and Dark and end with them in the clutches of pure Evil. *But I’m riding to an inn where some sort of Conclave is meeting, with a sign I can’t read on it, with a Darkworker in front of me and another one who promised to meet us later coming. I don’t think that I could fall much further into the clutches of Evil than I am already.* They reached the stable at last and boys poured out, fighting to be the one to take Kablash’s reins,

“My lord?”

Pheron started and glanced down into the eyes of the lad who hovered not far from him. He realized that the boy must think he was a lord in his own right. Of course, one would usually be right to assume that about Seros’s traveling companions.

“Do you need help getting down?” asked the boy, the pity in his eyes as he glanced at Pheron’s stump mingled with curiosity.

“I’ll be all right,” said Pheron quietly and switched the hold of his arm from Seros’s waist to the gelding’s back. In seconds, he was on the ground.

“You do that well,” said Seros, twisting around to watch them.

The boy stopped, staring upward with shining eyes. Pheron shrugged. “I thought that I should learn.” He turned to the boy. “If you’ll direct me to a room where I might lie down and sleep for a while, then I will—”

“Don’t listen to him, Klenton,” interrupted Seros. “He needs someone to look at that stump and ankle of his, and then he’ll come down to the tavern and join me in some wine and food.”

Pheron sighed. “Sleep is what I want.”

"You can sleep all you want, once you've had some food, and once the Conclave sees you." Seros turned back to talk with a groom about Kablash.

Pheron's eyes narrowed as he stared at Seros's back. Yes, there was some sort of Conclave meeting, as Deniessa had said, but Pheron hadn't thought he would be involved in it.

Klenton hadn't known it, either, but his opinion was quite the opposite of Pheron's.

"You're to be presented to the Conclave," he said, with such wonder and longing in his voice that Pheron would cheerfully have hit him. "I wish I had a chance like that. But I won't for at least five more years."

"I don't even know what the Conclave is," said Pheron.

Klenton just gave him a wide-eyed stare, as if to say that Pheron wasn't fooling him, and drew him into the inn. Pheron shot a glance around and paused. The common room was almost as big as the great hall in his family's castle and far better decorated. The hangings were all dark blue cloth fringed with silver and showed images of the kind that were popular among the villages of Orlath, instead of in the castle. Pheron didn't see one war-scene, but he saw dragons soaring across royal blue skies and dryads peeking out from their trees, their faces fair and fey. The stitching was incredible, far better than the clumsy symbol he had seen on Seros's surcoat.

"Come on," said Klenton and tugged him to the foot of the stairs nearby. "If you're going to be presented to the Conclave, you'll need the room right here."

He gestured to a door that faced the top of the stairs, and Pheron eyed it skeptically. It was made of wood and intricately carved with so many patterns of flowering vines that his eyes got lost seeking among them. What caught his eye even more than that, though, was the sheer heaviness of the wood. It could have lain on top of a grave and effectively kept in a revenant.

"I will find what I need in there?" he asked.

"Yes."

Klenton didn't offer any more information, and so Pheron mounted the stairs, leaning heavily against the wall. The pain in his stump was getting worse, and so was the agony in his ankle. With all the riding he had done, it had nearly healed, but the sprint through the city had aggravated the sprain again.

Pheron reached the top of the stairs and listened. Nothing came from behind the door, but then, nothing would. At last, he sighed and reached out to touch the handle.

It shimmered as his hand brushed it, and then the door was gone. Pheron had been leaning so heavily forward that he stumbled through the sudden gap into the room beyond.

This room was much darker than the common one below, though filled with the same dark blue color. This didn't come from wall hangings, though, but from a sourceless radiance that seemed to hover in the air itself. Pheron heard a soft song mingled with it, almost as if the voice and the light were one.

Something brushed his foot, and he looked down.

He saw a rough, green floor. For a long moment, he wondered who would build a room this way, covered with ridges that no one could possibly walk or stand on comfortably. Then, again, something brushed his foot, and he realized that he hadn't seen the real floor at all. A writhing mass of snakes covered it.

Pheron would have screamed, but he couldn't move. Fear took possession of his body. He stood still, only closing his eyes, hoping that his death would be quick. He recognized the snakes, though, as imeriel and doubted that he would die at once unless they all bit him at once. Imeriel poison was weak enough to kill slowly but painful enough to induce convulsions.

One of the snakes twined around his leg.

Pheron couldn't quite make himself face his death blind. Once again summoning the vision of the Lilitha Ocean, he looked down. The nearest imeriel had indeed climbed his leg, and for a long moment it simply clung there, tongue darting in and out, reminding him forcibly of the red dragon on the bank of the Terrana. Then it bared its fangs and bit down.

Pheron braced himself.

But another snake bit him at the exact same moment, on the other leg, and instead of the burning pain of the poison, Pheron felt a biting cold tingle run through his body. He shivered. Well, he hadn't talked with anyone who had actually survived an imeriel bite, since there *was* no surviving one. Perhaps it felt like this when two snakes bit someone at once. Perhaps the coldness was just a prelude to the poison.

The pain in his arm stopped.

Pheron turned his head, blinking. The blood had stopped, the wound had closed, and he could almost see the flesh writhing as it knit itself shut. No new arm growing, of course, but that didn't mean that it wasn't miraculous. He lifted a trembling hand and brushed it across the arm.

Another snake bit him on the ankle, and that was echoed by another bite high on his thigh.

The pain from his ankle ceased.

Pheron stood there, panting, and started when a voice spoke behind him. He hadn't heard the door open.

"The bites of two imeriel snakes heal. Only one kills."

Pheron turned, regarding the speaker as calmly as he could. It was clad in a dark cloak. He thought from some vague curves beneath the heavy cloth that she might be female, but there were no other indicators. The voice was low and smooth, musical but without a hint of the pitch that would have helped him to determine if a human speaker was male or female. He didn't think for a moment that this speaker was human, even before he watched it cross the distance between them with a snake-like grace and reach out to touch his stump.

"Where is your arm?"

"My brother cut it off."

"And is it true what Seros said?" What might have been the head tilted itself at him. "You are Pheron, who is brother to the Princess Emmeldra, and the Prince Hanir, and the Prince Leroth?"

"Yes," said Pheron, grateful that she hadn't given him any title, but wondering why she insisted on listing the titles of his siblings.

"Hmmm." The figure turned and walked away from him toward the door, stepping on the snakes as though they could bear her weight. Well, they seemed to, Pheron thought. "I must introduce you to the Conclave. Follow as soon as you have finished your food." She gestured to a table near the door that Pheron hadn't even seen, laden with a carafe of dark purple wine and a plate of cut meat that made Pheron's mouth water.

Pheron waited until she was gone and the door had shut itself—or whatever it was that it did—and then stepped gingerly toward the table. The snakes ignored him, even when he stepped on one of them and almost lost his balance. Carefully, he drank and ate, the wine almost stinging his throat with coolness, the meat glowing like a hot ember in his stomach. All of it was the best that he had ever tasted. Indeed, the wine was the kind that he had wished he had the night of Emmeldra's betrothal.

Perhaps, he thought as he drank, he might have gotten too drunk to follow Leroth and have his arm cut off.

Pheron dismissed the thought. What was done was done. He drank again and then turned toward the door, wondering if someone waited on the other side of it to escort him to the Conclave.

When he opened it, no one stood there, but Seros was waiting at the bottom of the stairs and looking up at him. Even in the relative darkness of the inn, Pheron could clearly see his glowing silver eyes.

“Pheron.”

Pheron shuddered a little at the ripple of power in Seros’s voice and nodded back, thinking his voice would shake if he spoke an answer.

“It is time for the Conclave to meet.” Seros turned and walked away from the stairs, into the common room. Pheron heard more of the same song that he had heard in the snake-room and thought that the dark blue glow had intensified and wasn’t just from wall hangings anymore.

He hesitated before going down the stairs.

Was he sure what was going to happen?

No.

Had he been sure from the moment he fled the castle?

No.

Pheron sighed and went down the stairs.

Chapter Nineteen

Toward the Healing of a Race

“It is not impossible to redeem anyone. And even if it was, that does not mean that those of the Light should give up trying to redeem Darkworkers. Just because the fight is impossible is no reason to give up.”

—Author Unknown.

Emmeldra looked up and smiled hopefully as Cloudshadow flew into the cave above her and settled gracefully into the carved channel that Emmeldra thought served her as both bed and chair. Emmeldra had been waiting patiently for the Dragon Queen, deciding that she might as well do something useful while she waited for her prince to rescue her.

If it was her Destiny to be picked up by a Dragon Queen who wasn’t supposed to exist and flown across the Corlirin for two days, then Emmeldra thought she should at least try to reform the dragons. It was something that Queen Aneron would have done. Indeed, Queen Aneron had once healed a spirit-sickness among the elves and brought them back from the side of the Dark to the side of the Light, or so all the tales of her sang and said.

“Your Majesty,” said Emmeldra, bowing her head.

“That is the wrong title,” said Cloudshadow, tilting her head and parting her jaws. Emmeldra had finally figured out that this was probably a draconic expression of amusement, and she hated to be the butt of a joke, but she nodded her head and tried to accept it politely. Anyone could make a mistake, and besides, the dragons had made a larger one than she could

ever have done, turning to the side of the Dark instead of the Light.

“What is the right title?”

“Kezeyitilinta.”

Emmeldra blinked. “I’m sorry, could you repeat that?”

Cloudshadow shook her head. “You are human,” she said. “You don’t need to worry about speaking the tongue of dragons.” She turned to look up at the side of the wall. “Bloodsinger, have you returned?”

The red dragon’s head projected again. “Flying over the Corlirin at the moment, Kezeyitilinta,” he said, pronouncing the roaring syllables with an ease that Emmeldra envied him for, ugly as dragon voices were compared to human. “I have been to the seaside cliff that the princess told us of and destroyed it, as you wished.”

Emmeldra uttered a loud gasp. “You are trying to destroy Destiny instead of flying in league with it?” she cried to Cloudshadow.

Golden eyes aflame with malice met hers. “I think that our little princess just figured it out,” said the Dragon Queen. “I will speak to you later, Bloodsinger.”

“Yes, Cloudshadow.”

The red dragon’s head vanished. Emmeldra stood up, trembling with rage. “How dare you?” she cried.

“How dare we what?” asked Cloudshadow and licked her claws.

“Turn to the Dark! Go against Destiny!” Emmeldra held her hands out, as though she were coaxing a deer to her in the wild wood. In a way, she was. She had to make the dragon listen to herself and realize just where her stubborn pride was leading her people. “You have done something that is evil, that is against fate, and for what? Words written in a book! We never realized that you could talk or that you had Queens, or we would have done our best to reach out and bring you to the Light as brothers and sisters. Please, forgive us our ignorance, and turn to the Light!”

Cloudshadow watched her with bright eyes for a long moment. Emmeldra defiantly met her gaze and held her pose. She would not yield. She would heal and reform the dragons.

At last, Cloudshadow said softly, though still with enough force in her breath to nearly knock Emmeldra off her feet, “How do you know that the Light is good?”

“I can feel it - burning in my bones. Searing through me when I think of my Destiny. I know that the Light is good, and that the Dark is evil, and that there is no higher feeling.”

“How can one know the Light is good?”

“One must experience it.”

“I have tried,” said Cloudshadow. “There was a time I was concerned about Light and Dark, as indeed all dragonlings become at some point, and I sought out the Light and the Dark and asked them for answers. The Dark sent a stormwind. The Light said nothing.”

Emmeldra relaxed. This was familiar ground. She had heard some of the condemned criminals in the castle dungeons speak so. “You did not seek the Light with a sincere heart,” she replied. “The Light scorns to send visible signs to those who will not accept it. When you come with a humble and contrite heart and give yourself up fully to the Light, trusting that it knows your Destiny and will see you through it, then you see the signs and feel the heat.”

“To see the signs, I must be willing to see the signs?”

“Just so.” Emmeldra was a little surprised that the dragon understood so quickly. All of the old writings about dragons said they didn’t understand the Light and the Dark or even why it was important to make a choice and had no moral sense. Then Emmeldra flushed as she

remembered that those writings also said that dragons couldn't talk.

"Then," said Cloudshadow, lowering her head and resting her chin on her paws, "how would I know what is a true sign and what is merely my desperation for a sign leading me to see patterns in meaningless gusts of air?"

Emmeldra felt a little flustered. She had been sure that Cloudshadow would speak next of accepting the Light. "You will know," she said. "When you have felt the Light, you will know."

"That is my point." Cloudshadow stretched her wings without taking her gaze from Emmeldra. "How would I know that I was really feeling the Light? What if I was only convincing myself that I was?"

"Why would you even worry about such a thing?"

Cloudshadow opened her jaws and tilted her head. Emmeldra's temper snapped. It was probably an unworthy thing for a princess to do, but she stepped up and smacked her hand into one of the Dragon Queen's fangs.

Cloudshadow looked at her. There seemed to be a keener light in her golden eyes than before, but Emmeldra didn't think the Dragon Queen was about to strike out at her. She nodded her head in satisfaction. "Let that be a lesson to you," she said. "The Light might strike at the Dark with impunity, but the reverse is not true."

There was no warning. Cloudshadow took her in one talon and lifted from the ground, wings beating so hard that Emmeldra gasped. Then they were rising through the dark blue light, and Cloudshadow roared, just as she had done when flying through the ravine into the dragon cave. Emmeldra winced from the sheer volume of the sound and then even harder when she saw the dark blue ahead of them turn into a solid-looking barrier of green jade.

They passed through the barrier as easily as through the dark blue, though, and Emmeldra gasped when she found they were falling toward the green, not flying above it. The green wheeled dizzily and resolved itself into trees. Emmeldra clung to Cloudshadow's talon in spite of herself as they flew in a vast circle above the valley floor. Emmeldra gazed down at the tops of trees several hundred feet tall and then couldn't bear it. She closed her eyes tightly.

"Look, Princess."

She looked, perhaps because it was impolite to disobey even the command of a Dark Queen. The vision dizzied her again, and she felt as if she would vomit.

"Do you hear me?" asked Cloudshadow, her voice beating like a wind all about Emmeldra's ears. "You have no right to question me. I told you that. And I will not have you thinking that I have not considered Dark and Light. I have."

"Then why did you not choose Light?" asked Emmeldra, her voice sounding very small compared to the dragon's.

"I never felt an answer," said Cloudshadow and wheeled in another circle. The dizziness grew worse. Emmeldra was almost sure that she would throw up now.

"I told you why you couldn't expect one," she said, building up her courage.

Cloudshadow dropped her.

Emmeldra screamed in despair as she fell, dress flying up and blinding her in a few seconds, hands rising to cover her eyes. She knew, somewhere in the back of her mind, that she should spread her arms to press against the wind, but that was only if she wanted to slow her fall. She knew she didn't have a chance here. She would never survive falling from such a height, even if she landed in water or treetops or snow.

Claws caught her. Emmeldra dangled like a mouse in a cat's grip, sobbing limply with relief.

Then the claws threw her.

Emmeldra flew through the air, screaming and sobbing, and then gasped and nearly bit her tongue in two as she slammed into another pair of claws. She looked up and saw a white dragon holding her, scales glittering almost intolerably bright in the sun as it wheeled around with her, silver eyes shining in play.

It flung her again, and this time Cloudshadow caught her, not only to the east of but below her original position, so that Emmeldra fell for another sickening, terrifying space before the catch. Cloudshadow began to whirl, and this time Emmeldra did vomit, the fruit they had given her to eat spinning away into the intense green light below.

Cloudshadow tossed her.

The white dragon grabbed her playfully and winged higher, until the air was thin all around her and Emmeldra felt as though it hurt to breathe. She was still crying, and tears and food mixed on her face.

The white dragon turned and dived.

Emmeldra screamed and screamed and passed out.

...to be continued in the April 2004 issue of Deep Magic

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